



The
Sorcerer's
Receptionist

3

Written by
Mako
Illustrated by
Maro

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



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Rockmann

(Alois Hades Arnold Rockmann)

Nanalie's rival ever since their days together back at magic school. Captain of the First Platoon of the Royal Order of Knights.

Nanalie

(Nanalie Persephone Hel)

Is diving into her second year as a "receptionist lady!" Now she's got junior colleagues and more responsibilities than ever. She STILL can't manage to get away from Rockmann and often finds herself being rescued by him for one reason or another!

Lala

Nanalie's familiar is a Blanc Lykos, a type of magical creature that typically roams the colder regions of the world. She is a white-haired, *girl* wolf.



Nikeh

(Nikeh Hera Brunel)

Nanalie's super girly friend! She serves as a Knight of the Royal Order, in the same platoon as Zenon.

Benjamine

(Benjamine Meda Lilith Feltina)

Nanalie's fashionable friend. She's making waves as a professional sorceress, working alongside her sweetheart Satanás.

Zenon

(Zenon Bal Zeus Doran)

Prince of Doran, third in line for the throne, and former class-mate of Nanalie's at magic school. Serves in the Royal Order of Knights.

Zozo

(Zozo Gaia Parasta)

Bright and cheerful, Zozo is Nanalie's senior at Harré and is always quick to help her out with work.

Dramatis Personae

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Genesis: Chapter One, “The Six Spirits and Their Sin”

A long, long time ago, back at the dawn of creation, when there were no people, no demons, nor any other living creatures in the world, there were six spirits who lived together in perfect harmony.

“Let’s go play in the fields!”

Fire, full of energy, ran off to the wide, wide grasslands.

Water chased after him. “If you keep running like that, you’ll get so hot you’ll burn the plants!”

Earth began to cry. “Hey! Please don’t burn up my grass!”

Lightning was quick to comfort her. “No more tears, Earth. If he burns them, I’ll blast him away.”

“I’ll go on and fly ahead of him,” Wind said, breezing through the air across the field.

“Everyone’s rather lively today, aren’t they?” Ice said, quietly watching over them all.

The six spirits often fought, but swiftly made amends. That’s why they were always smiling.

They were, however, the only six beings in the entire world. They enjoyed playing with each other, but they wanted to make new friends.

One day, Water asked everyone a question: “Do you think there’s anyone else out there?”

At the time, all six of them were resting underneath the shade of their favorite tree.

“‘Anyone’? What do you mean?” Fire tilted his head to one side, puzzled.

“She means like other spirits, right? Besides Fire, Earth, and the rest of us, I think,” Wind explained.

“We have a lotta fun together, but if we had *more* friends, then we’d have more fun, right?!” Water clapped her transparent hands with a *splash splash splash* as she smiled at the thought of having even more fun.

Everyone considered this idea. How could they make more friends?

Lightning crackled as he raised his hand.

“Come to think of it, does anyone have an idea as to how we were created?”

Everyone hemmed and hawed to themselves as they tried to think of an answer.

“I remember! The *Gods* created us.”

“But I don’t see any ‘Gods’ around...”

“That’s because they’re *invisible!*”

Earth raised both of her hands to the sky. “Hey, we have some power, right? Let’s work together and make some new friends ourselves!”

“That’s a great idea!”

“Sounds fun!”

“W-Wait!” Ice was quick to speak up against Lightning, Fire, Earth, and Wind, who were all excited about Water’s idea.

“We’ve always had fun together, right? Just us six? We don’t need to make any more friends as long as we have each other, right?” Ice, who always watched over the rest of the spirits playing together with a warm smile in her eyes, looked as though she was about to cry.

The other five spirits didn’t know how to react to this new, unfamiliar Ice.

“But, Ice—if we have more friends, we’ll have more fun, you know?”

“Water,” Ice said, “are you bored with our life as it is now?”

“Well, no, but...”

The next morning.

Ice was creaking and cracking the air around her with frost, in a manner not

quite like she had every other morning until that day. The reason, of course, was the fact that although it was morning, *she couldn't see the sun*.

In the sky, neither moon nor sun were visible. Every part of the heavens was covered in blood-red clouds. In the distance, she could see what appeared to be a tornado glowing a dark, deep scarlet, slowly spiraling downwards.

Ice searched for her friends.

But they weren't under their favorite tree, or playing in the field, or anywhere else, for that matter.

After she'd spent some time looking for her friends and found not a one, Ice began heading towards the conspicuously ominous tornado. It was underneath its slow spiral that Ice first saw someone—or rather, *something*.

It was large, black, chaotic—a mess of arms, standing upon a single leg.

“Ice! Help us!”

All the other spirits had, in secret, created a new “friend” to play with. The five spirits had wanted to surprise Ice, and had created this new “friend” out of their shared curiosity for what they might be able to make.

They had certainly surprised Ice, just as they'd wanted. But this new “friend” of theirs kept trying to eat its creators.

Large, black, and withering every blade of grass it touched, their new friend groaned on and on in a most disturbingly low, violent growl.

“It's gonna eat us!”

“I don't wanna be eaten!”

No, this was no friend.

This Shadow spirit dimmed Fire's flames, sent Water flying in droplets, and rotted Earth's own vines. Lightning's attacks had no effect on the thing, and Wind's tornado had been turned back upon him.

After all, this Shadow had all the powers and abilities of the five spirits who had created it.

“ICE. COME TO ME NOW, AND I SHALL NOT HARM THE OTHER FIVE. TOGETHER, WE SHALL BECOME A POWER UNLIKE ANY OTHER.”

Ice, seeing that the other five spirits were trapped within the claws of Shadow, had no choice but to approach as commanded.

“Ice! No! You can’t!”

“But—if I don’t, Fire, you and the others—”

“That doesn’t matter! We kept this a secret from you! It’s our own fault!”

Even as he was about to be eaten, Fire shouted at Ice to stay away. The others did the same. No one wanted to be saved at the cost of endangering Ice.

“N-No! I won’t let you eat everyone!”

“WHAT DO YOU—NGH?!”

Ice gathered all of her power and froze the great Shadow solid. It had been able to resist the attacks of Fire, Water, Earth, Lightning, and Wind, but it hadn’t been able to defend itself against Ice, the only spirit whose power it did not possess.

Ice, who had used so much of her power, watched as the Shadow splintered into glittering ice crystals, which were caught by the wind and blown far up into the sky.

Drained, Ice had defeated the Shadow, but found herself disappearing, fading... and then she was gone completely. She was no longer in this world.

The Shadow, which had shattered into countless fragments, in time fell from the heavens like a storm of shooting stars, falling back to the ground and disappearing.

The five remaining spirits looked up at the sky, no longer red, and cried.

They cried and cried and cried.

Time passed, and then a cloud of Light descended from above to rest before the remaining five. “I felt Ice disappear from this world,” it said. “You five have done something that cannot be undone. It is easy to create, but it is very difficult to destroy something entirely.”

The Light before them was none other than the God who had created them.

The God was, to be sure, not angry at the spirits. They already knew that they had done something irrevocable, permanent—both in their creation of the Shadow, and in the loss of Ice.

The God spoke again. “In just a little while, I shall fill this world with more life. When I do so, be sure to share your powers with your new friends.”

“Share?”

“Our powers?”

“Yes. But for the dark spirit—no, I suppose we cannot call it a ‘spirit.’ It is nothing but a pale imitation of your own existence. From here on out, we shall refer to it as a Demon.”

“A Demon?”

“The scattered shards of the Shadow that have fallen across this world shall one day grow fangs again. In order to protect your new friends, you must share your powers with them so that they can protect themselves when that happens.”

“But Ice is gone!”

“No matter how many new friends we make, without Ice—without Ice, I—We —”

The God merely smiled.

“Take better care of her this time, won’t you?” At these words from the God, a small, faint light fell into Fire’s palm.

It was something very cold, cold enough to nearly douse the flames in his hands.

Fire had known a similar feeling before.

Once—just once—Fire had wanted to hold the hand of a certain spirit.

He had been happy, so happy, and had wanted to share that feeling with someone else quite badly.

Fire had only ever touched Wind, Lightning, and Earth before. If he touched

those three spirits, they hardly burned, and they never hurt him either. Well, he *did* burn Earth a little whenever he touched her, but still, he was able to touch her.

But not Water or Ice.

If he touched Water, she would start to steam away, and he felt himself beginning to disappear as well. If he touched Ice, she would melt, and he would feel very weak.

“Ice! This is fun, right?!”

“Yayyy!”

Even knowing what would happen, however, in that moment he had wanted to hold Ice’s hand so badly he hadn’t cared about the consequences. Ice had been anxious to do the same, and while Fire had felt that his hand was moments away from disappearing entirely, he was happy.

*“Listen: you can never leave Ice out of your fun and games *ever* again.”*

Fire looked down at the Ice in the palm of his hand. She was very small, and hadn’t even opened her eyes yet.

Fire, despite being *fire*, found himself unable to stop crying.

“That little one is not the Ice you knew, but still—take good care of her, alright?”

One hundred years passed, and upon the land there appeared animals. All of the spirits gave some of their powers to each of these animals.

Another hundred years passed, and now humans appeared. The spirits, as they had done for the animals before, shared their powers with them.

As they did so, however, the shapes and forms of all the spirits became more and more transparent. The smallest of them, Ice, had given all she could, and looked about ready to disappear.

“Ice! No! I don’t want you to go away again!”

Earth cried when she saw her how pale Ice was.

“Thanks for all the fun, everyone.”

“You can’t go!”

“Even if I disappear, I’ll live on, inside the humans and the animals. And you’ll always have each other. So it’s not sad at all.” Ice smiled. “Let’s play together again, someday.”

Recently, Ice mages have grown fewer in number.

What might be the reason for this? Not a soul today can fathom why.

Excerpted from “Genesis, Chapter One.”

Life As a Receptionist, Year Two: Part One

“As an Associate Sorcerer, I think these three jobs might be best suited for you.”

I put three light brown sheets of paper down in front of the man sitting across from me at my desk.

“For this one, you’ll be reading books to a family of five children before bed. It seems as though the clients, their parents, have something to do at that time that requires them to leave the house, so it’ll be kind of like babysitting. If no sorcerer accepts the job within three days, it’ll be canceled, so perhaps—”

“That job has *nothing* to do with magic! Shouldn’t they be asking a professional caregiver to do something like that?!”

“Mr. Makdei, please. We first need to get you used to the idea of ‘working’ a ‘job’ since you’re a new sorcerer. After the children fall asleep, they *also* want you to walk their carnivorous pet banpi. They said it tends to get wild and tries to escape by flying off into the sky, so they suggested a Wind mage would be suited for the job. And, pardon me for saying this, but as far as I can tell, you’re a very kind, gentle man, and so you’re suited for a job like this one, more so than other, more bloodthirsty sorcerers. I know I can trust you *to do the right thing* with this job—or so I’d thought... If that’s not the case, then we can move on to this job—”

“No, I, uh, it’s not—”

The sorcerer, who had been downcast as I spoke, lifts his eyes to meet mine.

“Take care!” I say, smiling at the sorcerer as he makes his way out the door.

The Season of Flowers is past. It was over all so quickly, and just when I thought the Season of Distant Skies had begun, that too is speeding right on by.

During the Season of Distant Skies I’ve turned nineteen years old, but I haven’t felt as though I can point to a specific thing that I’ve done or a way in

which I've grown over the past year. I've never been one to look myself in the mirror and say things like, "You've grown up, haven't you!" The reason for that was, I suppose, the fact that I simply wasn't very good at evaluating myself in any way, really. *"Self-reflecting" is a lot harder than it sounds.*

From what I've heard, Director Locktiss will be giving us a bonus at the start of the Season of Light, following her formal evaluation of our performance at work. I've no idea what that evaluation might entail, or how much extra money I might get, but I am still managing to find the whole thing rather exciting.

Please, let me be average, if not above average. Nothing less than average. If I were a sorcerer, I'd be somewhere between an Expert and a Master, right? The sorcerers at Harré have their ranks: "Associate" for beginner sorcerers without much experience, "Expert" for those who do a good job and have completed a certain number of demon exorcisms. Beyond them, of course, are the "Masters," who had completed at least two hundred standard jobs *and* an additional two hundred exorcisms, who could take on any job no matter how dangerous. All sorcerers dreamed of having the title of "Master" here at Harré.

"That request—they didn't ask for a woman to do it, did they?" said Ms. Harris.

"No, actually. All five of the children are girls, and they simply won't listen to anyone outside the family who isn't a handsome young man, or so they said. Setting the 'handsome' part aside, they'd told me any *young* man would do just fine. The five girls came right in here and told me themselves just the other day, in fact."

"What demanding little brats!"

Ms. Harris, sitting next to me, had overheard the whole conversation I'd had with the sorcerer. She has one hand over her mouth as she looks over the request form.

"Considering it's his first job as a sorcerer, I thought it would be good to recommend something simple, so he can learn the whole process of taking on and completing a job here at Harré—that's good, right? Babysitting may be *simple*, I suppose, but I wouldn't call it 'easy,' so hopefully it gives him a bit of a challenge—the other two requests were just cleaning, after all. Anyway,

according to what he wrote on his Sorcerer's Profile, he has little brothers and sisters, and is well-liked in his neighborhood. He has that nice, older brother feel to him, don't you think?"

"Oh goodness, Nanalie, certainly, but with a face like *that* he's perfect for the job, I would say."

"Do you like that type of guy, Ms. Harris? Fresh-faced and all?"

"Well, I'll just say that I'd let him *invade my personal space*, if you catch my drift."

It's been a whole year since I started working at the Guild, and this is the beginning of my second.

After all my experience with doing reception for clients, I've successfully moved on to doing reception for sorcerers, which I've been doing for about half a year now. In that time, I've learned that you can't do everything this job requires by simply being kind, considerate, or persistent.

In addition to kindness, consideration, and persistence, you also need to be *severe*, stubborn, and immovably strict, in some instances.

"I'm telling you that this is too dangerous for you. You think we classed this as a 'Master'-rank job as a joke?"

"Whoa there, you're just a dumb receptionist! The hell are you doing, taking that sort of tone with me?"

"I'll have you know that inside Harré, we are *all* equals. You ever hear of something called 'supply and demand'? Oh no, you haven't? Goodness me, it's a wonder you ever became a sorcerer with a mind like that. Congrats."

"You better watch how far you keep running your mouth with me, lady. You're just some freaking receptionist."

Two reception desks away, I can hear Zozo and a sorcerer getting into a heated argument.

There are a lot of sorcerers who get dissatisfied with the types of jobs we offer to them. Masters, of course, don't cause such a scene, but newly-minted Experts, as well as Experts who are champing at the bit to become Masters, well

—both of those types of sorcerers, novices and plateaued intermediates alike, tend to take this sort of attitude with us receptionists at one point or another in their careers.

“Who the *hell* do you think I am?” is usually the line they use when they get like this, but every time they say *that*, it just makes me want to say, “Hey, *buddy*, who the hell do you think *I* am?” There’s certainly been a couple of times when I’ve caught myself about to launch into it, saying “hey”— but I just swallow my words. I don’t intend to *ever* say anything like that, but it does worry me how many times I’ve gotten close to that point.

Zozo, however, is on an entirely different level than the rest of us. She’s just “that type of person,” it seems. The Director and the other receptionists don’t criticize her for it at all. They seem positively glowing with looks of admiration as they watch this latest argument, as if to say, “Thank you! Finally, someone’s calling that idiot out on his bullshit!”

“—Hmph. I may have spoken harshly, but I was not trying to *insult* you, you know. Clients have approved of your work, and we receptionists are aware of how well you’re doing. You’re definitely on your way to becoming a Master, and I’m just trying to help you do that.”

“Wh-What’s this, all of a sudden? Are you *complimenting* me?” The man is confused.

“I’m just saying, you have what it takes to become a Master. Still, it’s dangerous to try to speed your way through the promotion process. You’ve come so far—you really want to get all panicked about your rank *now*? Surely you don’t, right?”

Here it is, Zozo’s secret, one-hit K.O. technique: the “bait and switch.”

The Expert sorcerer, who’d just been completely beside himself in a frenzy to get a Master-rank job, has now calmed down completely upon seeing the kind generosity in Zozo’s eyes.

“That thing she does—it’s something, alright.” Ms. Harris looks on with approval as she watches the whole situation unfold.

“I’d never be able to do something like that,” I say, shaking my head.

“Everyone’s got their own style, so don’t feel like you have to. Getting *that* type of sorcerer back on track, in *that* way, must be pretty tough to pull off, anyway.”

This is one of those things that *wasn’t* written in the reference manuals I’d feverishly looked through so many times during my last year as a student in magic school: part of our job is to guide sorcerers through their careers, especially those novices who don’t know left from right when it comes to “working” a “job.” My senior colleagues have told me the most important thing to remember is to be steadfast, resolute, and reliable, so that all of the sorcerers trust us to take care of them.

Still, what Zozo’s doing over there certainly goes beyond all that. I need to get on her level. I need to stop complaining about my sorcerers and work on negotiating calmly and firmly with them, so that we’re both satisfied with the jobs that get accepted and who takes them on. That’s my goal for now. Or rather, my goal for as long as I’m working this job.

“Hel, take care of this, would you?”

Someone passes me another request form with a job ready to be offered to the right sorcerer.

“Yes, sir!”

Another day, another pegalo. Let’s get to work!

* * * *

In the Year 3667 by Arland’s Reckoning, on the Tenth Day of the First Month of the Season of Light.

This year, yet again, Harré only has one new employee.

“Things are not looking good for the Guild!”

“Alright now, Director, please calm down.”

Cheeks and nose all aflame with a red flush of frustration, the Director stabs the bibi roast with her knife. Her action shakes the table enough that a little water spills out from my wooden cup where I’m sitting at the table across from her.

“What in the *world* do they think is wrong with us?! We do a pretty good job at the Guild, don’t we? Obviously our work isn’t very flashy, and we ourselves don’t actually *solve* the problems our clients come to us with, and sorcerers *do* tend to whine and complain about this, that, and the other way that we’re not meeting their demands—but we pay better salaries than everywhere else! That has to count for *something*, right?!”

The surrounding employees try to comfort her.

“Director, you’ve had too much to drink.”

“Don’t get all worked up over the Order of Knights. They’re not worth it!”

Director Locktiss, who’s sipping on the rather strong *manas* liquor she’s holding in her left hand while stabbing the roast with her right, has tears in her eyes, and her cheeks and nose are beet-red. I check to make sure I have a dose of the hangover medicine I get from Mr. Petros stashed in my shirt pocket, so that I can whip it out whenever it’s needed.

“Berryweather! Put on some clothes!”

“Nnnnnnooooo—! It’s so hoooooooot—!”

Ms. Bell had started undressing the instant she’d begun drinking alcohol, complaining of “the heat.” Zozo panics as she sees her state of undress and keeps her from removing more layers.

Today we’re having a welcome party for our new employee, but the person who’s supposed to be *doing* the welcoming (our lovely Director Locktiss) is drowning her sorrows in liquor. And that’s despite the fact she’d been all cheerful and positive at the beginning of the night, toasting the Guild’s new hire with “Thank you for joining us! Let’s get some good work done together!”

The conversation after that, however, had turned to the hire’s time at school, and she told us a lot of her classmates in her grade had gone on to join the Order of Knights. Hearing this had just driven the Director to despair.

Ms. Harris had whispered her concerns to me, the moment the topic of “school” had come up, that we really ought to change the subject before “something happened”—and, of course, something *had* happened: our Director had turned into a crying mess. *We really should’ve talked about something else.*

“Miss Hel, what is that you’ve got there?”

“This? Oh, it’s hangover medicine.”

“Do you always have that on you?”

“No, but when we go out drinking like tonight, I do try to keep some in my pocket.”

“That’s such great thinking!” She claps her hands together in admiration and her adorable flared hairstyle bounces up and down.

The sole new hire of this year is a young woman by the name of Cheena Kasar. She tends to heap praise on literally everyone all the time. I can’t *stand* flattery, so I really hope she stops over-complimenting me in front of everyone.

“Pleased to meet you! I look forward to working with you all!”

On her first day at Harré, Cheena’s job consisted of going around to greet all the other employees one by one. It would have been more convenient for her to greet everyone at the same time, but at the Guild we didn’t really have the time to gather all together like that during the day. She said that meeting people one by one made it easier to remember their names, anyway. *I think I thought the same thing when I arrived here last year, didn’t I?*

“Miss Hel!”

As someone who doesn’t particularly like surprises, I’d been quite taken aback when she gripped my outstretched hand with both of hers and shook it quite vigorously, breathing heavily with excitement all the while. I’d thought a lot about how I should greet her, if I should give her some cookies or something as a welcome gift, even, but had not imagined *that* sort of introduction. Then there was her insistent use of the word “Miss” every time she said my name. I didn’t care for it, to be honest.

“Miss Hel! At first I wanted to become a sorcerer or a knight, but when I heard you got a job here at Harré, I simply had to apply here as well!”

“O-Oh...? Is that so?”

Backbone straight as a ruler, she always has such excellent posture. Forthright and direct, that’s Cheena. Not that I’d ever spoken to her at school. The only

time I'd ever interacted with students from the lower grades had been during our magic-type breakout lessons, and as an Ice-type, that had only been about five other students.

"You were my role model! You always got along so well with all the other noble students in your grade. You always seemed like the life of the party! You were my shining star, a fellow commoner, smart as a whip, cute and pretty and really really—"

I covered her cute little mouth with my hand before she could sing more saccharine praises of my character.

"A-Alright, okay?! I got it! Actually, everything you just said was wrong, so I don't 'get it,' but I've had enough already, so just—"

Before I thought to be embarrassed, I'd racked my memories to try and remember if any of those things she said had ever been true. Yes, the noble kids *had* eventually stopped being so mean to me, and while I'm not sure I ever got along "so well" with them, I did have better relationships with them than most other commoners in my grade. *That said, I certainly don't recall ever being the "life of the party."*

The other noble students *had* crowded around Rockmann and me during our quarrels, so I suppose I had been the life of *their* party, from a certain point of view. From Cheena's perspective, it might have seemed quite lovely to be the center of attention, but I distinctly recall the cheers (jeers) my classmates had been shouting as we fought, things like: *"Sir Alois! Please don't lose to that blockhead Hel!"*

I wasn't sure whether she'd seen me as the "life of the party" because I was simply older than her and she didn't understand the situation, or she'd been mistakenly informed by someone else, or what—but anyhow, I didn't want to explain the whole embarrassing reality of my life back at school, so I simply said: "I'm not pretty, I'm not cute, I was only second in the class rankings, and while I wasn't quite the 'life of the party,' I am happy that you think so."

She'd interpreted my whole situation as something quite different from reality, but I couldn't help but smile when she called me her "role model." It made me at least as happy as I felt when I had just bought a new hairpin and

was eagerly anticipating wearing it the next day.

...How many times do I have to tell her I don't like it when she flatters me like this?

"Miss Hel, I have a question about something Miss Zozo taught me today, do you mind?"

"What is it? Let me take a look."

"I was just a little worried that I hadn't quite understood this one part of the form."

"Oh, this part? This is where the client's..."

She is, of course, a superbly gifted young woman, well suited to working at Harré, and passionate about her work.

"Everyone, think of a plan to increase the number of new hires next year before we go out drinking again!"

"Sure..."

"There are more and more demons and sorcerers we have to deal with every year, but we aren't hiring enough new employees to deal with them all!"

And so it was that as the party was ending, while we were all at a party to welcome our new employee, we were given homework to figure out how to increase the number of new hires the following year.

* * * *

"Hey! Crazy hair!"

The sky is clear as can be this morning. On the other side of my reception desk, his tiny hand outstretched, stands a little black-haired boy standing on his tippy-toes to get a look at me.

"Hello there. Here again today with your father?"

I glance to my left to see his father discussing some potential jobs with Ms. Harris.

"He made me bring him along!" the boy said. "Who cares about him! Hurry up

and show me some jobs right now, just for me!”

“Hm, maybe next time! I’ll be here waiting,” I said.

“Y-Y-You just watch me, you weird witch! I’m gonna be the best sorcerer ever!”

“I’m sure!”

This boy often accompanies his father on his jobs. At first the boy had reminded me a lot of myself, but unlike me, this boy also goes with his father on demon exorcisms. *Impressive, really.* His father’s ranked Master, so I’m not *too* worried he’ll get injured, but I do wonder if he’ll come back unscathed every time I see them off.

From what I understand, he’s a student at the village schoolhouse, and in three more years they’re planning on him attending school on the Royal Isle.

“I bet you’re looking forward to that,” I’d said, to which he’d told me to *“shut up!”* so I’ve refrained from making any more small talk with him. Still, he brings me rocks he’s picked up while out in the field with his father, so I know he doesn’t hate me *too* much. Or so I tell myself. I like kids, but if someone were to ask me if I was *“good with kids,”* I’d have to say “no.” I don’t have any siblings, so I never got used to that whole dynamic growing up. Well, maybe that’s just the excuse I give myself, but I do really think little kids are cute.

“Later!”

The boy, Beck, runs out the door after his father.

He’s really just a stranger to me, but I’m looking forward to seeing him grow up. A good mage you shall become, young man.

One of the other receptionists had apparently overheard him flinging insults at me. “What’d you ever do to *him*?”

“Well, the boy, Beck, really just wants me to give him a job, so he can prove he’s a ‘real’ sorcerer to this girl he likes, or so his father told me. Cute, right?”

“Don’t you think that the ‘girl he likes’ might be—”

“Ms. Receptionist, whatcha got for me?”

The sorcerer who appears at my desk is one of my regulars. As I look down to find some jobs fit for him, I find myself biting back a yawn. My eyes tear up a bit from the effort. *Jeez, am I sleepy today or what? Come on, Nanalie, no sleeping on the job.*

I quickly blink away the tears and hurriedly straighten my posture so it's not obvious I was just yawning. I zoom through the details of the jobs I've picked out for him, and after he's stamped the ones he likes, I wave to him as he heads out, back into the field.

That was way too close. If someone saw me yawning on the job, I'd be finished as a receptionist. Goodbye, The End.

"Alright Nanalie, time to switch!"

"Thanks! I'm heading out on break, everyone!"

I quickly get up from my seat. The receptionist who's taking over for me sees how fast I'm rushing away. "Do you need to use the ladies room?" she whispers, concerned.

With a smile, I say, "Nope! Just taking a break!" and then scamper off to the guild employees' library.

As I'm moving past the desks, I pass by Zozo and give her a little nod of greeting.

"Ah!" she says, and I stop in surprise. "I saw you, I saw you," she sings in a little gloat, "you just yawned, didn't you?"

"Eeep!"

"You've gotten to be just like me," she laughs, as if it's the most amusing idea in the world. *What kind of person finds it funny to catch other people yawning?*

"Not getting enough sleep lately?"

"I'm going on a trip with my friends in a few days, and I'm so excited I can hardly sleep! I just keep imagining all the fun we're going to have."

"That's a bit of an unexpected answer, I must say."

Yes, I'm traveling out of the country with Nikeh and Benjamine in a few days.

Our destination is a country along the shore, so I'm not just excited about traveling, I'm thrilled at the idea of seeing the sea for the first time in my life, for real, not just in a painting or in a book.

"It's my first time going on 'vacation' anywhere, so I'm pretty excited, to be honest."

It'll be my first real "trip." I never went on vacation with my family growing up, and for that matter I've never even left Doran. *Nobles and other rich folk probably travel abroad all the time, but for a household like ours, which couldn't at all be considered "wealthy," traveling had been an unobtainable luxury.*

"I thought for sure you'd been pulling all-nighters trying to draw magic circles, studying new types of magic, or locking yourself in the materials room on the weekend or something."

"Well, yeah, I have been doing those things, but the closer we get to the day I leave for vacation, the more excited I get!"

"Ah, so young, so innocent! That's our Nanalie."

Zozo has told me how she's been to lots of different countries with her friends. It seems as though every weekend she's off to a different country, near or far. Experienced traveler that she is, I've gotten a lot of advice from her about things to be careful about while traveling. She's also peppered me with details about places that were fun to visit, places that were dangerous, and places that, while dangerous, were still worth going to. Just hearing more of her thoughts about my destination makes me think I'm going to be pulling another all-nighter tonight, lying awake on my bed, dreaming of my upcoming adventure with my friends.

Zozo invites me out to dinner after we get done with work, but I'm determined to do some cooking myself this evening, so I head right back to the dorms. Were we different people, one of us might say something like, "Well in that case, let's make some food and have dinner over at your place!" but we aren't quite like that. She heads off with a smile, by herself, on over to the Vegetarian Wolf. I have absolutely no intention of trying to change her ways as a restaurant addict, as she shows no desire to change herself, anyway. I try to imagine what Zozo's ordering for dinner as I make my own.

“Hmmm, what should I make for dinner? Maybe I should sauté some vegetables...and that’s it?”

I feel like ever since I started living on my own, I’ve been talking to myself more. *Can’t let that become a habit. Be embarrassing if someone ever overheard.*

“I’ll just whip up something easy from whatever I have on hand,” I say to myself, checking my cabinets. I get out and tie the apron I got from the dorm mother upon moving into the Harré employee dorms. I take good care of it, and it’s still almost as white as the day I got it.

My mother had gone to the trouble of drilling into me the basics of cooking, but quite honestly I hate doing it. Or rather, I’m bad at it. *If only I could just use a couple of simple spells to conjure up good, fresh food.*

Complain I may, but as I’ve spent more nights practicing the whole routine, I’ve gotten an intuitive feel for the right amount of heat, spice, and time for different types of dishes, and I’m now even confident enough to start experimenting with different flavors for familiar dishes and adding in unusual ingredients. *I am getting better at this. Or so I feel. Still haven’t had anyone else try my cooking yet, now that I think about it.*

“Alright, mix the greens, heat them up, add some spices—shoot, that was too much.”

No matter how bad you may be at something, it’s important to think of ways to make the activity fun, difficult as that may be to do.

“Lala, dinner’s ready!”

It’s a bit lonely to eat dinner all by oneself, so I’ve gotten in the habit of taking my evening meal with Lala.

Lala’s usually in the Familiar Dimension, playing with her familiar friends, or so she tells me. Humans can’t go there, so I’ve no idea what that “dimension” is actually like, but she seems to enjoy her time there, so it can’t be too bad. She even has her own house there, all made of ice. As someone used to living in a pack of other animals, she’d been surprised by how perfect the Familiar Dimension was for her.

“Wow! That looks cold!”

“Well of course! It’s just cubes of ice, after all!”

I’ve conjured up a bowl of ice cubes for Lala as her dinner this evening and put it on her plate.

Humans can’t go into the Familiar Dimension, and familiars can’t talk about their masters while they’re in there. Or so I understand. Furthermore, their memories of that place “disappear,” as it were, within one or two minutes of being summoned, for as long as they’re in this world. When they go back, they regain all their memories unique to that dimension, but it’s quite clear our two worlds are sharply divided. Once, I summoned Lala, and she’d been so happy to tell me all about the friends she’d been playing with, but in mere moments, her story had stopped making sense, losing any sort of details, until she stopped remembering anything at all. From then on, I’d stopped asking her much about what went on over there.

“Blessed are we to receive this food,” I pray. “You say it too, Lala.”

“Blessed are we,” she says, nodding her head.

This two-world system means that no matter whether a familiar’s master is a good mage or an evil mage, the familiars have their own lives to enjoy, separate from us humans. *As long as it’s peaceful over there, I don’t mind her being away from me. Too much.*

Lala says she prefers spending more of her time over here with me, so I summon her as often as I can. Inside my apartment it’s rather warm, but around her swirl chill breezes, brought about by her own special identity as a Blanc Lykos.

“Lady Nanalie?” she asks.

“What’s up?”

I’m humming to myself as I put some veggies on my fork, eager to see how I’ve done tonight. Lala’s gnawing on her ice ball next to me.

“What’s that box you’ve left open?”

“I thought I’d put some of my clothes and accessories I wore during the

Season of Distant Skies in there. I was just in the middle of cleaning house, you know.”

“Are you going to stick that little box next to the window inside it too?”

Lala points with her nose towards the little green box that’s lying on the ledge underneath the largest window in the room.

“That can stay there. I want to leave it out so the coldest drafts in this whole room breeze right over it.”



I say nothing else about the little box, and we finish eating dinner in silence.

Once I finish eating, I pick up my plate and utensils off the table, wash them, then head to the bath, enjoying sinking down into the nice, hot water. I change into my tan pajamas and hop into bed.

Lala's still in my room, summoned, and we sleep together until I have to go to work in the mornings. She doesn't sleep *in* my bed, of course (I'd be cold, and she'd be hot), so she's just lying down on the floor nearby.

I don't immediately close my eyes upon lying down and merely stare up at the ceiling for a while.

A good bit of time has passed since that whole Orcinus incident. Now my life is exactly like it had been before the whole ordeal, and I don't think about what happened too often. I don't see Rockmann around anymore, and Nikeh and Prince Zenon, who'd been part of the whole thing, had apparently been transferred to the Soreiyu District right after he left, so I hadn't met up with them, either. I do still write letters to Nikeh, Maris, and Benjamine, however, so it's not like we never talk. Plus, we are going on vacation together soon, so we'll have a chance to catch up then.

Still, I hadn't heard so much as a whisper about that weird demon that had appeared in the ballroom that night, and I certainly wasn't about to start asking questions about it either. At the end of every letter from Maris, however, she would sign off by writing:

"Three more days." "Two more days, no, ten." "One more month...?" "Ohoho! 'Just two more months'! How naive of me to have thought that!" "I've grown a gray hair in the past three—no, four months—since he's been gone!" "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!"

She seems quite upset over how long Rockmann has been out of the country.

I'm scared of what she'll say or do if I express my sincere displeasure with her constant reminders of my old nemesis, so I just take her letters, read them, and respond with just a single line on otherwise white paper: "Patience is pretty."

"Why's she getting so worked up over that womanizer anyway?" I grumble to myself, rolling over onto my side. *I stayed up all night last night, so let's get to*

sleep early tonight. I erase his face from my mind and try to relax.

My windows don't have curtains on them. I look out at the night sky, gradually feeling my eyelids begin to droop with weariness until, slowly but surely, I drift off, asleep at last.

* * * *

For the first time in a long while, my father comes to visit me at Guild headquarters.

He usually goes to the west branch office, but sometimes he makes a point of coming here to watch me work. To be honest, it's embarrassing, so I've made a point of ignoring him. It's completely pointless, though, as he goes out of his way to draw attention to the whole situation by giving little souvenirs to the other receptionists, thanking them for "always taking such good care of his daughter."

Dad, please, stop! He, of course, acts like he can't see the embarrassment written across my face, and comes up to my reception desk to tell me about the recent fights he's had with mom (or rather, what she's scolded him about—my mother's typically the one getting angry at my father).

Even if I do manage to refocus my attention back on my work while he's around, I feel like I'm a little kid back at the village schoolhouse and my parents have come in to watch. It's awful—but I still love my mom and dad.

"Nanalie, I need you to head out on a preliminary investigation with Harris," says Mr. Alkes.

I summon Lala and head outside. This preliminary investigation involves a request from the Curator of the Museum of Culture. Supposedly there's a painting inside the museum that, when women walk by it, they faint—*only* women. He wants us to help figure out what might be causing the problem.

The Curator himself seems to suspect that the painting is a type of demon. Since the Curator's a man, nothing happens to him when he passes it—although he *does* report he's unable to take it off the wall, and so he's closed the museum for the time being.

"Still, a demon? In the form of a painting? What in the world do you think it is,

Ms. Harris?”

“It could be cursed. It could also be a Dream Demon, or something like it... Oh look, we’re here.”

The large building housing the Museum of Culture looms over us. Its exterior frame came from an old structure built over one thousand years ago, but it’s been remodeled to have a modern interior. While it doesn’t look *actually* haunted, whenever I’m standing in front of a large building, I can’t help but feel that someone—or *something*—is looking down on me from the windows above. While I don’t mind looking down on others, being looked down *upon* is not something I find too pleasant. *The only people that should be looking down on me are the members of the royal family, as well as my boss and senior receptionists. I suppose I don’t mind too much if my parents and friends also look down on me.*

...Hold on, do I really mind being looked down upon by anyone at all, at that point...? As I’m thinking about such trivialities, an old man, bearded and hunched over, comes out of the museum, leaning on a staff. He beckons us forward.

“We’ve come from Harré. I hope we haven’t kept you waiting.”

“Well, well... I’m glad you’re here.”

After a brief introduction, we head inside. The first things I see are small scale models of Doran’s geographic regions. I visited the museum back when I was in school in my village, but these models hadn’t been here then. The museum’s interior had changed a lot as well—what used to be plain, rough floors made of splintery gray boards are now covered with beautiful red and gold carpets, and on the walls are lovely little magical lanterns that give the place a much more homey feel. I compare what I see with what I remember as I walk down the hall, my memories overlaying reality.

The Curator guides us to the painting that’s been the cause of so much trouble. Or perhaps I should say he guides us to the *general area* of the painting. Ms. Harris and I are standing quite far away from it, too far to see anything more than dim outlines of what’s inside the frame.

“So that’s the problem picture, if you will.”

Ms. Harris, who has fairly bad eyesight, fusses with her glasses, trying to get the image into focus. “I can’t see anything at all!” she grumbles.

She’s completely forgotten the Curator standing nearby.

“Don’t suppose you ladies feel like fainting now, do you?”

“There’d be hell to pay if we did,” she says, squinting over at the painting.

I (belatedly) realize that it might have been better to send a *man* on this preliminary investigation, considering the fact that only women are affected by the painting. I mention this to Ms. Harris, but she reminds me that we wouldn’t know what sort of magic is at work here if there were no women around to activate it. Furthermore, I was the only one capable of psychometry who’d been available, so no matter who else might have been preferable, the two of us were all the Director had had to work with.

Anyhow, back to the matter at hand...

“I’m going to try doing some psychometry,” I say. Before I begin, I cast a protective barrier around Ms. Harris and myself—not that I have any idea whether it’ll be effective—then approach the painting. Behind us down the hallway, the Curator moves not an inch closer. *Figures. Well, I shouldn’t have any issues with this protective barrier, so here goes nothing...* I stick my index fingers out at the painting and spin them ’round and ’round.

All while recalling what I had for breakfast this morning and dinner last night.

But there’s something else I can’t stop thinking about—

“I must confess, I don’t really ‘get’ art. Sure, it’s a pretty picture, but it’s also a bit of a mess as well.”

I’ve never been the artistic type. Trying to understand the picture in front of me in “that way” just makes my head spin.

Ms. Harris points at a portrait of an old man. “I mean, I don’t get it either—supposedly *that* is worth a pretty penny, but I haven’t the foggiest idea why.”

The problem painting portrayed a man alone, sitting in a small boat floating on a lake. As I’m performing the psychometry I don’t see anything about it changing, nor any sign that someone’s cursed the painting or otherwise

changed it. Just as I'm about to release the psychometry, however, I notice something odd.

"M-Ms. Harris—"

"What's the matter?"

"I think the man—sitting in the boat—I think he's drowning a woman."

"Hmmm, what? What did you say?"

It's difficult to tell because I'm seeing it all happen in reverse: what I literally see is the man pulling a woman out of the water. *If I were watching this in the normal direction of time, however, the man wouldn't be pulling her out of the water—he'd be pushing her down into it. The original painting must have been of a man and a woman riding in the boat together.*

Ms. Harris quickly polishes her glasses with the hem of her sleeve and takes another look. I reverse the flow of time once more to show her the part of the scene where the man "pulls" the woman out of the water. Ms. Harris instantly claps her hands over her mouth.

"Ugh, that's *crazy* terrifying!" she says.

I drop my hands, ending the spell, and shake my head. "I won't be sleeping tonight, that's for sure."

"Moving pictures" are not particularly unusual. There are spells that can cause that effect. But it's clear that this is no mere picture—it contains some fairly grotesque imagery. *The subject of the painting is committing a murder before the viewer's eyes. Of course people would find that disturbing and disgusting. The picture moves so slowly that the viewer probably can't even tell what's happening, moment to moment... I'd think that the Curator, who'd seen the image in its original state, would have had a better idea of just how much it had changed...but given its severe effect on some of the people who pass by, I suppose I can understand why he wouldn't want to take a close look at it.*

I myself find it scary. There's nothing pretty or interesting or mysterious about it—just "scary."

Ms. Harris turns to me, gently twisting and pulling out the curls of her brown

hair as she thinks aloud. “This is probably a curse...but maybe one someone cast unintentionally? It’s like the picture itself is haunted.”

I nod in agreement. “It certainly does seem like a phenomenon that might’ve been caused by a *pestokraive*.”

“You know, Lightning mages are good at dealing with this sort of thing—ghost exorcisms.”

She’s got a point. There are a lot of Lightning-types who work as spiritual mediums.

“Alright then—Curator! Please keep the museum closed.”

We write down our notes and turn to leave. Ms. Harris gives the Curator a short nod as we pass him by in the hallway. He’s still crouched down near the wall, for some reason. Without stopping to say goodbye, we make our way to the exit.

“Beg your pardon, Miss Harris, but do I gotta stay here alone with the ghost...?” he calls after us.

“Oh, I think it would be best if you returned home, *all by yourself*, sir.”

Ms. Harris sounded a bit frosty. But I suppose her attitude makes sense. She told me that the old man once hit on her while she was out on a job. He must be more...“vigorous” than he appears.

“Hey! Maybe the guy was a total *tsundere*!”

“Good grief. I *knew* you’d say that.”

We’re in the dorm’s bathhouse. While I’m soaking in the hot water, Zozo’s pressing Ms. Harris for details of the preliminary investigation we just went on.

I could’ve just used the bathtub back in my room, but when I’m really tired, soaking in the hot water of the big bathhouse pool is the best cure for weariness. I’ve finished washing my hair and my body and am leaning back against the edge of the pool with my hair in a ponytail.

Zozo’s going on about how the man portrayed in the cursed painting must be a *tsundere*—basically, how he must *love* the woman in the painting, but

somehow *hate* her as well. *How can you love someone, but also hate them? Now if they were, say, mortal foes, I might have a better understanding how*—the image of a certain blond-haired guy flashes through my mind. I frown at the thought.

“Oh, that’s right!” Cheena joins the conversation. She’d come into the bathhouse while the rest of us were already here. “I’ve been meaning to ask you, Miss Harris—do *you* have a lover?”

“As if I would ever have a lover!”

Ms. Harris is quick to dismiss the question. Zozo is attempting to hide her giggles at the forceful reply. For some reason, Ms. Harris has left her glasses atop her head while she’s in the bath. Their lenses are completely clouded over.

“What about you, Miss Hel?!” *Ugh. And I thought I was safe, over here in the corner.* I’m up to my shoulders in the hot water, a bit removed from the others—but that hasn’t prevented Cheena from asking about potential *lovers*.

“I don’t have anyone like that in my life.”

“R-Really?! Miss Hel, I must admit I’m quite surprised!”

“Well that just makes me wonder why you thought I had a lover in the first place! What about you, Cheena? Do you have a special someone?”

“No, I do not.” She sinks low into the water and blows a few bubbles before continuing on. “I just thought that since that silver-haired guy is always with you, Miss Hel, that he might perhaps be your lover.”

She sounds sincerely confused. The little bob of hair she’s tied at the top of her head makes her look that much cuter as she holds her chin barely out of the water.

The only “silver-haired” guy I know is Satanás. We had certainly stuck together a lot back in school—every time we had to change classrooms, like for a tutorial in weather magic or something, we walked the hallways together, out of an unconscious sort of class solidarity as the only two commoners. *No wonder she thought we were a couple.*

“We’re not like that *at all*,” I say.

“Oh, is that right...?” Cheena, bored with my reply, begins blowing bubbles again.

She must have wanted to gossip about boys, or something. I don't have any of those kinds of experiences to discuss, really. Sorry, Cheena.

Zozo muses some more about the painting. “But let's think about it—what kind of guy would hate a woman that way? She must have turned him down *real bad* when he asked her for a date, or something.”

Ms. Harris isn't having any of *that*. “I'm not quite sure we can say that, though—Zozo, you're always quick to imagine those sorts of scenarios.”

“Huh? Nah, that's *definitely* what happened! She must have spat at him, right when he proposed marriage on that little boat! I'm sure of it.”

I've no idea *how* she's so certain about this particular interpretation. *She's generally on the mark with her perceptions of other people, though, so perhaps she's right.* I sink down lower into the water and begin blowing bubbles, just like Cheena.

“Anyway, it's a tired theme—this idea that the one who falls in love first is somehow the victim, the loser.”

My ears perk up at the word “loser.” I lift my mouth out of the water and ask Zozo to clarify what she just said.

“The first to fall in love is...a loser?”

“Yeah. That's romance, isn't it? The one who falls in love first has gotta be weaker than the other.”

“The one who falls in love...is the loser... Hmmm...”

“Romance” sounds terrifying. Nobody's ever told me that love is a competition! It's a good thing I haven't fallen for anybody yet. Means I haven't lost. I breathe out a small sigh of relief. *I'd hate to lose a game where I didn't even know the rules.*

“Oh dear—did I just say something I shouldn't have? I did, didn't I?”

“Not at all. I'm glad you told me; I'll be sure to remember.”

“Ahhh! No! It definitely seems like you’re interpreting what I said in the wrong way!” She pauses, and then takes on the strained tone of a schoolteacher as she says, “Nanalie, love isn’t a competition, okay? No one loses anything by falling in love. If you like someone, and get them to like you back, well, hey! That’s a win, right? ‘The first to fall is the first to lose’ is just a saying, you know, it doesn’t actually *mean* anything.”

Then she starts going into microscopic detail about the personalities and appearances of the men she likes—and starts sipping on the flask she snuck into the bathhouse, getting herself quite drunk in very short order. As Cheena and I pull her out of the water and get her dressed, she mutters to herself, “Mmmmaybe the first to fall is the loser after all...” And with those words, she falls silent as we go back to our individual dorm rooms and call it a night.

Life As a Receptionist Lady, Year Two: The Land of the Sea

Today's the day! Vacation time!

We meet up early in the morning in front of the gates of the Doran border crossing. We end up leaving the Kingdom much later than we had originally planned, however.

I call out the reason for our tardiness: "You're *late!*"

"Eh, couldn't help it. I was out of hair gel."

Nikeh has her hands on her hips as she says, "Just to be clear, *no one is ever looking at your hair.*"

Both Nikeh and I glare reproachfully at the silver-haired young man in front of us. Three of my friends are going on this vacation with me. One of them, Satanás, was a rather *last minute* addition. *He told us he was late because he needed to fix his hair, but to me it looks just as curly as ever.*

We prepare to leave by putting on our cloaks. A brown cloak for Benjamine, black for Satanás, blue for Nikeh, and a well-worn, well-loved white cloak for me.

Nikeh gives him a big thumbs down. "As penance for your sins, you're gonna be a meatshield for Nanalie and Benjamine this entire trip!"

"Well, Benjamine's parents already asked me to do that. Something happens, I'll save her. Just her, though."

"I can't decide if that's the coolest or *scummiest* line I've ever heard."

So that's why he's here. Benjamine's parents must have asked Satanás to come along. I'm sure they felt more comfortable knowing she'd be accompanied by her romantic and professional partner.

Benjamine told us her parents wouldn't allow her to come without Satanás,

period. Nikeh and I had, of course, agreed to this condition. *But still—wouldn't any normal guy find it irritating to be the odd man out on a girls' vacation? Then again, this is Satanás we're talking about.*

When I ask Satanás why he agreed to come he answers without hesitation. “Why wouldn't I wanna come? One guy, three girls, together on vacation—ngh!”

“I'm going to call you Li'l Nás from now on so you don't forget what a *small* man you are.”

Nikeh swipes him with a quick right hook to the face. *Violence is never pretty, I think, but I enjoyed watching that.*

“Hey, did Naru say he's going to 'save me'? He did, didn't he, Nanalie?”

“Yep, he did.”

Benjamin's taken to calling Satanás by his first name, “Naru,” quite a bit more often recently. Despite the fact that he's just been punched, she seems happy that he's publicly pledged to defend her should anything bad happen. *That's about as close to “I love you” as he's going to get, I suppose. She's probably replaying his words in her mind right now, over and over. Even if Satanás was sent flying across the horizon or the very world was about to end, I doubt she'd care much at all.*

Why's he gotta always be hitting on other women in front of her, though?

He cocks his head to one side and looks at me. “So? Where're we headed once we get through the border gate?”

“Well, first we'll enter Sheera, get our papers stamped, then head on to Yard, Chania, and then the Kingdom of Daldry.” I show him our route on the maps in my travel magazine.

“That's a pretty damn 'scenic' route, don't you think? Couldn't we get there faster?”

Will this guy ever shut up? If you don't like my itinerary, go ahead and walk to our destination.

“This is the best we got. I traced this route starting here and passing only

through countries that let us fly through the borders on our familiars. I think it'll be good."

"Sounds like a slog to me," he mutters.

Nikeh's exasperated again by this comment. "You wanna go by horse and carriage, Li'l Nás? You gonna ride that horse 'til you can't ride it no more, that's how long *that's* gonna take."

Resolving to ignore the Man Who Won't Stop Complaining, we all show the small blue passports we got from City Hall to the guard at the border gate deep in the forest, and write the name of our destination in his ledger. We don't have to write the names of the countries we're passing through along the way, so I just put down "The Kingdom of Seleina" and hand the ledger back to him.

This is the first time any of us are leaving the country, so he gives us some warnings and advice before we depart. Once we've checked all our luggage, the guard opens up the massive, heavy iron gate, far taller than any of the surrounding trees, and waves us through. We get on our familiars, race through the gate, and begin flying our way across the continent. Four or five hours or so later, we catch sight of our destination.

"Hey—! Where are we now—?"

"Uuuuuh, hold on a sec—! Lala, could you hold this in your mouth for a moment?"

We're high in the air above Daldry Kingdom. The people and towns below us look like toy dolls and scale models, each person with their own tiny house, their own little lives. *The view from here looks just like what I saw in the Museum of Culture the other day.*

The Royal Isles in each Kingdom have different and unique features. Some of the floating isles are long and thin, others squarish blocks, others spherical. The castles in the sky are also a wide variety of colors and styles: Castle Doran is pure white, but Castle Sheera is blue, and Castle Daldry is yellow. *What color might be Castle Seleina?* I look over the map to check.

"Nikeh! Can you see a round, red gate—?"

"No—!"

“Benjamin! What about you—?”

“I can’t see anything—!”

There’s a map of the Keedolmani continent in my travel guide, with additional pages for detailed maps of each country and kingdom. There are also convenient little mark-ups on each map that help you figure out your bearings relative to other kingdoms.

“We’ve already passed the Royal Isle of Daldry, so it should be just a bit farther...”

It’s a full half-day before we catch sight of the gate indicating the border of the Seleina Kingdom. The sun’s about to set, and the fleeting red rays of dusk are lighting up the sky. Flying next to me, Benjamin shouts, “Look! There it is!” Her phoenix familiar, Benita, cries out in excitement.

Flying through the sky at such high speeds means that we have to speak quite loudly to be heard by each other. Benjamin’s infectious shouts of glee get us all excited as well.

“Is that—it’s the sea!”

Satanás is the first to spot the most thrilling feature of our destination. I try to contain my excitement as I scan the horizon for the gate. I squint, and catch sight of a building with a round red roof. *That has to be it.*

I shout out to the others. “It’s down there! Follow me—!”

As one, we descend to the gatehouse.

* * * *

It’s nighttime in Verbano, a town in the Kingdom of Seleina.

Since it’s so dark, we decide to immediately head to our inn for the night. *The sun set so quickly.* We’d wanted to do some sightseeing before going to bed, but everyone’s tired—or rather, completely exhausted. Nikeh collapses onto the bed the instant we get into our room. “I’ve never flown that far in one day, even for work!” She pats the head of her snake familiar, Paula, as she stares up at the ceiling.

Lala worked really hard today, carrying me this far. I give her a nice little

scratch behind her ears in thanks. *I'll give her extra for dinner tomorrow.* We ate tonight's dinner already while we were still flying, so no one's hungry now.

"I wanna get started on our sightseeing early tomorrow morning!"

I roll around on my bed, squirming with excitement. Benjamine shakes her head as she watches me. "Where's she getting all that energy, after the flying we did today?"

"Beats me," Nikeh sighs. "He can't sit still either." She jabs her thumb over at Satanás, who's running around the room from window to window, looking out. *Why is it that I always end up getting lumped in with this guy?* Thinking about being paired up with Satanás reminds me of my school days, which reminds me of Maris.

I really wish she could have come. Apparently, when she asked her parents if she could come with us, they replied with something like, "A noble young woman? Traveling alone? Don't be absurd!"

The "alone" part must have been referring to no other nobles coming with us... They completely ignored us commoners, didn't they?

Anyhow, as an attendant to the Queen, Maris wouldn't have been allowed to leave the Kingdom for a personal vacation. When she told Nikeh, Benjamine, and me that she couldn't go with us, she ended by saying, "Ugh! Being a noble is such a pain sometimes!" We'd had a bit of a group hug moment after that.

"Next time we go on vacation, we'll go straight to your parents and ask them to let you come with us, okay?"

She should be with us right now. She should be experiencing all this with us, together.

Maris, you're adorable. I'm sorry you couldn't come with us.

"It's really pretty outside though, isn't it?" Benjamine says, smiling as she looks out the window.

"Yeah," I say, "it really is."

Nights in the towns of the Seleina Kingdom are as sparkling and beautiful as the stars above. The round red lanterns I can see outside my window cast their

dim light on the colorful signs above the doors of shops. Despite the late hour, the streets seem almost as though they've trapped some of the crimson light of sunset, glowing with a faint, warm brilliance. The town is just as lively at night as it must be during the day, with people walking hither and thither, solo and in groups, all wearing the unique traditional garments of the Seleina Kingdom.

Lining the streets are trees unlike any I've seen in Doran, big, tall trees with round leaves. *Are they interesting to me because they aren't in Doran, or because they're inherently interesting trees?* Doran, of course, has its own unique flora and fauna, but I can't help but feel *jealous* of the Seleinian people, somehow, because they get to live in a town with all these lovely trees. On the ground, I see grass everywhere around the inn—and it's *blue*.

There's also a large, tall clock tower in the center of Verbano. Supposedly the sound of its bells rings out most beautifully at night. *Ah! I really hope I'm awake to hear the chimes while we're here.* Every new thing I encounter outside of Doran just makes me that much more excited to go out exploring tomorrow morning.

"Hey, Satanás—the heck you doing down there on the floor?"

"I'm sleeping here."

This idiot's crossed his arms behind his head and is using them as a pillow. He's stretching his shirt so much his navel is exposed! What a slob!

"You have your own room, don't you? Why don't you just go sleep there?"

"Don't wanna. Sounds lonely."

"Good grief, *how* old are you?! If you're gonna act like that, come over here and sit next to Benjamine."

We've got two rooms with two beds in each. There hadn't been any three-or four-person rooms available when we made our reservations. We've divided up in the most sensible way possible: Nikeh and I in one room, Benjamine and Satanás in the other. *No one's complained about the roommate pairings, but if we all end up hanging out in the same room, what's the point of paying for two?*

The walls are red brick, the floors wooden boards. There's a small, portable woodstove in the corner, but we're visiting Seleina during the hottest season of

the year, so there's no point in trying to use it. *Why'd they leave it in here when it's hot outside? For the aesthetic?*

The room also comes with a private bath. *Yeah, this was definitely the right inn to choose.*

"Right then—where should we go tomorrow?" I hold up a travel magazine containing a list of the top Seleina attractions.

Benjamine thrusts her fist in the air and declares, "To the ocean, obviously! People who come all the way to Seleina but don't go to the beach must have something wrong with them, seriously!"

I glance at the other two, who are nodding their heads in perfect agreement.

And so it was that the very thing I was most excited to see here in Seleina turned out to be the very first thing we had all decided to see tomorrow. *We're going straight down to the beach tomorrow!*

We also decide we're going to try wearing some traditional Seleinian clothing while we're here, so before we go to sleep, we head down to the first floor of the inn and buy our outfits for tomorrow's outing.

"I'll take this one."

"Two hundred tohru, please."

Us three girls take our time in picking out our traditional garb, but Satanás seems to be walking over to the register the very second we enter the store, having already chosen his stuff, tried it on, and determined it satisfactory. *Men sure are quick when it comes to shopping. Or maybe just Satanás is.*

Waiting for us to finish, however, allows him time to start hitting on the local ladies. Right now, he's cornered some girls who look like they're on a trip just like we are. *This guy's hitting on women not only in a different country, but inside the very inn we're staying in! Hopeless, isn't he?* Nikeh notices what he's doing as well. She turns to me, gives me an exaggerated, exasperated roll of her eyes, then tries to warn Benjamine about what's going on—only, she's not with us anymore.

"Quit harassing these poor girls!"

She's dragging Satanás away from his targets—literally *dragging* him across the floor, by his ears. Nikeh and I give each other a look. *She's pretty used to dealing with his antics, isn't she?*

"Hey you two! Decided yet?"

"Mmmm, not quite. Did you say you already had an outfit, Benjamine?"

"Yeah, my mom gave me one of hers. She has a ton of them back home."

Benjamine's mother was actually born and raised here in the Seleina Kingdom. The traditional garb here leaves a lot of skin exposed, so it makes sense that Benjamine, raised by such a mother, often dresses in a similar manner back in Doran—wearing clothes that show her belly, her legs, or other parts of her body.

Come to think of it, isn't Ms. Berryweather from Seleina as well? I believe she told me once that she moved from here to Doran when she was little.

A lot of first names in the Seleina Kingdom begin with "B," or so she'd told me. *Considering how skimpy Ms. Bell's clothes always are, I can certainly believe this is her home country.*

In Doran, by the way, names that begin with "A" are rather common. *Even within my own circle of acquaintances I know people like Mr. Alkes, Crown Prince Arman, and "Alois" Rockmann.* A good number of those names also end with an "S," so when two people who live or work together have very similar sounding names, others tend to refer to them by their middle names. *There's no other way to differentiate them, after all.*

"We have an early start tomorrow, so be sure not to oversleep!"

We're back up on the second floor and standing in front of the doors to our rooms. Benjamine's still yanking Satanás around by his ears as I remind them of our plans tomorrow.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he says, eyes tearing up a little from the pain. *Is he really sorry? Honestly, I have no idea, but I suppose that's Benjamine's problem.*

"I trust I'll see you both out here tomorrow morning, bright and early," I say, looking dubiously at them as she wrangles him into their room. Right before

Benjamine closes the door, she smiles at me, saying, “You can leave it to me, Nanalie! ’Night!”

Nikeh and I enter our room, getting to bed early so we can be all rested for tomorrow’s adventure.

* * * *

This dress is definitely a lot more comfortable than anything I had to wear when I was at Castle Doran. I actually like how much skin is left exposed—why is that? Maybe it’s because it’s easier to move around in, or something.

The weather today here in Seleina is hotter than it ever gets in Doran, even during the Season of Flowers. *Maybe that’s why they wear so little clothing?* It’s not *horribly* hot outside, but it is too hot for me to summon Lala and have her accompany us down to the beach.

It wasn’t hot at all last night, though. Even this morning when we woke up, it’d been rather cool. Now that the sun is well above the horizon, however, it’s so warm I feel as though I’m about to melt right here on the beach.

The clothes I’m wearing, however, are exactly the same as those of the city residents walking around the town, looking cool as can be and paying the heat no mind at all. *Sure, it’s a bit hot, but I must admit wearing this little clothing does feel rather liberating.*

“Oh hey, look, we’re here.” Beside me, Nikeh’s wearing clothing that completely shows off her arms, her hips, and a good deal of her chest. She’s got a big, adorable hat on though, to protect her face from the sun.

Benjamine looks just as flashy as she normally does—her chest piece seems to be a bit more colorful than usual, perhaps. “Doran has a ‘lake,’ but when compared to this, it’s practically a pond.”

One of our party, however, can’t seem to stop himself from staring at all the beautiful women on the beach, jaw dropped and practically drooling. “Look at the curves on these girls...”

The sky is as blue as the sea, and the clouds are white as the sand. All of us are presented with the most extraordinary sight stretching out before us, all the way to the horizon: “So this is the *sea*,” I say in awe. None of us have ever been

to the coast before, so this encounter with the sea is a first.

I'd imagined what this moment would be like so many times while looking through my travel magazines. Heck, I was still staring at those pictures of the sea just yesterday.

My friends had gotten irritated with how excited I was about seeing the sea. *I don't think I've shut up about the idea since we started planning this trip. And now, it's right here in front of me...* I lay one hand against my chest, close my eyes, and take a deep breath. *Calm down, Nanalie, this isn't something to start screaming about—*

Benjamine, however, seems to have no such inhibitions about shouting for joy in public. "Let's gooooo!"

She pulls Satanás by the hand all the way down to the water—I mean, the sea—both of them running freely over the sand. *Last night, she'd finally got as excited as I'd been about seeing the ocean, so of course she's gonna go sprinting down there.* Seeing Satanás allowing himself to be dragged all over the place by her makes me wonder, though. *She's gonna have him whipped for the rest of his life, isn't she?*

Nikeh and I give each other a look, laughing at the sight of our friends, then start running down after them.

"Is this what the sea smells like? Wow, it's amazing!"

"Hahaha! Nanalie, you're getting way too excited!"

"But this beach is just like a big sandbox!"

"It does feel nice and smooth on your feet, doesn't it?"

I'm walking barefoot on the beach. The sensation of the sand against my skin reminds me of when I was young, playing in the sandbox at the neighborhood playground with my friends.

Playing with my friends was my entire world back then. I didn't care what anyone around me thought as I ran and jumped and laughed, day after day. The older I got, though, the more I was told "you shouldn't do that" or "that's not what a girl should do," and a whole lot else by the teachers back at the

schoolhouse.

My mother hadn't agreed with those teachers at all. Not one bit.

"But who cares whether you're a boy or a girl, big or small? Those aren't very important parts of who people are. Life is short. Those who enjoy it as much as they can are the real winners. Do whatever you want with all you are."

It's a bit strange to say this, but I really do think that it was all thanks to my mother's encouragement that I grew up to become the woman I am, did what I wanted to do, and went to school to become the person I wanted to be. (I did end up dropping out of school for a bit when the teachers had first told me that, though.)

"Hey! What do we do if the water, like, suddenly comes rushing up at us?! I read about these things called 'tides' in a book once."

"The heck are those?"

"It's where the beach goes, like, underwater because the sea water rises, or something."

"Whaaat?! That sounds amazing! I wanna see a 'tide'!"

Nikeh and I happily giggle as we make our way down to the water, without a care in the world.

"Oh! That's cold!"

I slowly dip my feet into the seawater, and the resulting invigorating chill is like an electric shock to my system. I get goose bumps all down my legs, but the ebb and flow of the water against my ankles feels amazing.

I roll up the hem of my thin skirt so it rises above my knees. The water sprays up into the air as another wave crashes, and all the droplets sparkle as they catch the sunlight. Benjamine and Satanás are splashing water at each other, and seeing them, Nikeh and I start doing the same. I kick the saltwater over at her, she kicks some back, and so begins our splash fight.



“Young lady, might I ask...”

I’m dripping with water from all the splashing when an old man stops near us. He looks like a local out for his morning walk, but he makes the strangest request: “Might I ask you to splash some water on me as well?”

Huh? He must be hot, or something. Nikeh and I splash some water on him, and he claps both hands together and bows to us in thanks. *Guess he was hot after all.* I laugh a little at how weird the whole thing was.

Once the old man’s out of sight, Satanás comes over and says something like, “that old guy’s got the same vibe I do,” at which I begin completely ignoring him, not wanting to hear anything further.

“I think I need a break!”

“Sounds good, I could use one too.”

Caught up in all of our excitement, we’ve gotten a little tired, so we decide to take a breather under the shade of some trees bordering the sandy beach. It’s hot, but the breeze is cool. I could use some magic to kick up a stronger wind, but the natural stuff feels better, somehow. I lay down on my side on the sand, close my eyes, and relax.

After a while I open my eyes and look out at the waves, watching them come and go.

Long live the sea. The sea’s the best. Thank you, Mother Sea.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice something most surprising. I quickly sit up to make sure I’m not hallucinating.

“Um, hey, could you like, slap me, Benjamine?”

“Sure.” *Slap!*

That was harder than I expected. “Th-Thanks,” I say, massaging my blushing left cheek.

“No problem!”

I look over at what I’d noticed once more, just to make sure it’s still there—and it is. *Am I the only one seeing this?*

I lean over to tap Nikeh's shoulder. "Hey, Nikeh, take a look over there."

"Over there? What... Huh?"

Nikeh recognizes what I'm seeing as well. *Guess I'm not hallucinating after all. That's goo—no. That's not good at all. I think I'm gonna be sick.*

"The Captain and His Highness? Why might they be here?"

The blond, womanizing bastard is, unusually for him, strolling down the beach wearing commoner clothing. His outfit is simple—he's not even wearing his trademark vest. *Must be easier to move around in.*

His hair looks like it's gotten longer again. Now it's halfway down his chest. You know, they say a pervert's hair grows faster than average, so... I shake my head to rid myself of such thoughts. I really need to stop thinking about such random stuff all the time.

"Wasn't Rockmann supposed to be 'studying abroad' or conducting an investigation or something?"

It's not just the two of them, either. Walking next to Rockmann and the black-haired Prince Zenon is a beautiful woman with long, flowing hair wearing traditional Seleinian garments. Farther behind them is a group of men dressed like Satanás, nude from the waist up. Behind *them* I see Ms. Weldy walking, also dressed in traditional Seleinian garb.

Prince Zenon and the beautiful woman are walking together in front of Rockmann, talking about something. The prince isn't wearing his usual military outfit but merely light trousers, a shirt, and sandals.

They aren't that far away from us. It looks, actually, as though they're getting closer. We're in the shade, however, and a little removed from the beach, so thankfully it doesn't look like they're about to notice us.

"I've no idea why they're here. It's surprising that His Highness is here at all."

"Nikeh, did you know that His Highness was going to be traveling here?"

"Well I knew he was fulfilling his duties as substitute Captain of the First Platoon, but our duty schedules haven't overlapped for some days now. We haven't spoken outside of work, either."

Ugh. This isn't going to be good.

How do we always end up running into each other? I have to be cursed or something, right?

I really do need to stop by a shrine on my way home and do a thorough cleansing to rid myself of this horrible, horrible "spirit" that keeps following me around.

"Let's ignore them," I say. "We haven't seen anything at all."

Nikeh nods vigorously at my suggestion. "Excellent suggestion. If you two meet, there's bound to be trouble, anyway."

It's then that I notice Satanás is no longer sitting next to Benjamine.

"Benjamine, what happened to Satanás?"

"All of a sudden, he jumped and ran over there...? Hold on, is he talking to His Highness and Rockmann?"

"Whaaaaaaat?!"

Satanás is indeed *right* where Benjamine's pointing—which also happens to be the exact place where Rockmann and the rest are gathered.

NOOOOOOOO! Run, Satanás, hide! We were never here!

It's too late. Satanás is waving and calling out to Prince Zenon, who's turning to look at us. *There's no saving me now.* I hug my knees close to my chest and hang my head. *Really, Satanás? Of all the times, you choose now to not be hitting on women.* I groan to myself. *Wait—that woman who's walking with the two of them is quite beautiful. Maybe she caught his eye, and then he noticed who the others were.*

They're still a ways away when all of a sudden Prince Zenon stops and yells at Satanás, "Why're *you* here?" At this distance, his voice isn't much louder than the dim sound of crashing waves or the breeze through the trees. *They don't know why we're here, we don't know why they're here. Figures.*

"Hey, you guys! Come on over!" Satanás, who's apparently totally incapable of taking a hint, yells for us to join him.

“As if I’m about to go over there!”

“But look—His Highness is smiling and waving for us to come.”

“WHY?!”

Just what kind of conversation is Satanás having with Prince Zenon?

“Suppose we don’t really have a choice,” Benjamine says. She and Nikeh stand up.

“No way! You guys aren’t actually going, right? Right?! Hey!” The two of them grab my wrists firmly and begin dragging me along the sand, just like Benjamine had dragged Satanás through the hotel last night. My legs trace two long lines across the sand.

We get there quicker than I anticipated. “Gotta say I’m surprised to see all of you here,” Prince Zenon says, laughing. I feel rude for having thrown such a tantrum in front of him, so I fix my posture and try not to appear *obviously* displeased.

“And why, might I ask, is Your Highness here?”

“I’m in Seleina on official business. The princess here was just showing me and Alois around town. Bella, these four are friends of mine from Doran.”

So that’s who that beautiful woman is. Behind Prince Zenon, standing next to Rockmann, is none other than a princess of the Kingdom of Seleina. She’s stunningly beautiful, with hair as white as the sand beneath our feet. The princess looks at each of our faces closely, nodding to herself as she does.

“Zenon has a lot of *female* friends, yes indeed he does... I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

“They aren’t just my friends—they’re Alois’s as well.”

“Is that so? How delightfully *common* of you!”

The conversation zooms right past any explanation of *why* Rockmann and the others are here. *Perhaps they’d rather not talk about that right now.*

The princess makes some polite small talk to each of us in turn: “What curly hair you have!” to Satanás, “You have a lovely figure,” to Nikeh, “Were you born

in this country?” to Benjamine, and “That’s a *unique* hair color you have there,” to me.

She’s a friendly, lovely person. *I’m sure she’s a popular member of the royal family.*

While we’re talking with her, the locals wave as they pass by, and she returns each one. *Popular, and busy.*

Princess Bella Nafs Seele Seleina is first in line to the Seleinian throne. She’s giving Prince Zenon a tour of her kingdom, and for some reason Rockmann and Ms. Weldy have accompanied them down to this beach.

The men behind her are her guards. *They certainly look like guards, but they’re acting like they’re just a big group of friends.*

“It’s been a while since we’ve had some fun—let’s enjoy ourselves!”

The princess links one of her arms with Rockmann’s. *Is it really acceptable for the princess of a kingdom to be so touchy-feely with a foreign, womanizing bastard?*

Satanás is apparently thinking the same thing. “It alright for you to be touching a guy from Doran like that?”

By the Goddess. I can’t tell if he’s a massive idiot or incredibly courageous for having said that to a royal from a different country. Fearlessly foolish? Foolishly fearless?

“Well I can’t exactly cling to Zenon, a *prince*, like this, but Alois is just the second son of a duke, so it’s totally fine. How could I stop myself from touching his arms, anyway? They’re *begging* to be touched!”

The hell is wrong with this woman? Rockmann’s arms are “begging to be touched”? What in the world is that supposed to mean?

I realize Rockmann hasn’t said a word the whole time. I look at him—and we make eye contact.

“Ick!” *I think I just barfed a little.*

“Nanalie, what’s wrong?”

I'm a little surprised to sense sparks are flying the very instant our eyes meet—but I can't avert my gaze, because that means I'll lose this little staring contest. *I don't know what he's thinking, looking at me like this, but I'm not about to be the one to break eye contact.* Calm, cool, and collected, our eyes remain locked.

"Here they go again," mutters Nikeh next to me. "Hey—what's that dark shadow?"

"What shadow?"

"It's coming this way—" Benjamine points out at sea. Reluctantly, I turn away from Rockmann to see what she's talking about.

Hmmm, I think I see what she's talking about—it looks as though there's something dark, far out in the water. It's getting closer, though, and it's unnaturally large...

Ms. Weldy, who hasn't said a word of greeting to us, notices the large creature as well. Pushing back a strand of her light brown hair, she says, "it's kinda creepy..."

And then—

Boom, boom, boom, splash!

"My Lazie! I ha'e vinally vound ye!"

All our eyes are practically bulging out of their sockets as we stare at what has just exploded out of the sea, onto the beach, showering us all with water droplets.

It's an absolutely *massive* fish. Kind of. It's a massive *creature* that's built like a pipe.

Even if that was a fish, I'd never eat it. Looks disgusting. And those eyes! Swerving all over the place! Speaking human language with that rattling voice! And its fat, quivering lips!

"What the *heck* is that *thing*?!"

"Ahhhhh!"

“Eeeeeek!”

The beach is consumed in an uproar of panic. All the beachgoers who had been enjoying the sea are now fleeing the scene, screaming.

“My Laziiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!!”

Both Rockmann and Prince Zenon jump in front of the princess to protect her from the massive, charging behemoth.

“Is it referring to the princess by calling her ‘My Lady’?”

“If so, we gotta get rid of him! Oh, look, they’re already doing it.”

The royals and the guards all begin throwing spells at the leviathan, like that’s the most natural thing to do in this sort of situation. Familiars are flying through the air all around us, pressing the attack.

That was so fast! Just what I’d expect from Knights and royal guards.

Out from the sides of the creature’s fat lips stretch long, whip-like tentacles—*ugh, how vile*—that are engaged in combat with multiple adversaries at once.

Benjamine and I give each other a concerned look. It’s obvious to both of us that we can’t step in and start fighting, because we might just end up getting in the way of the professionals. As we watch the fight go on, however, we realize something odd.

“Their spells—they aren’t working.”

“Something’s wrong, that’s for sure.”

No magic is effective against the monster. None whatsoever.

Prince Zenon’s lightning, Rockmann’s flames, Nikeh’s water, Satanás’s wind—none of their magic is working against this thing! The other mages don’t seem to be having any luck either.

As a test, I send an Ice spell hurtling against its flank—to no effect.

“Bella—”

“Alois!”

Rockmann leaps away from the assault team to stand back near the princess.

He must think her safety is the top priority here. He holds her close against him, one arm outstretched and ready to cast a spell should the beast approach.

She sounds panicked. “I’ve never seen an animal like that before!”

“Is this really the first time?”

“Yes! Not even in pictures have I seen *that*!”

Glancing to my right, I see Rockmann holding the princess against him, blocking her from the creature’s sight. *That’s a relief—as long as he’s around, she’s safe. Magic may not work on it, but as long as she’s in his arms, it can’t just carry her off without a fight.*

The princess has wrapped her arms tight around his neck.

“It’s alright,” he says quietly.

The princess, however, looks over his shoulders at the monster and its encroaching girth. *Those tentacles are just about close enough to—wait, look—the princess is one step ahead of me.* She’s casting the Coat of Many Colors spell on herself to become invisible. *Still, if one of those tentacles tries to grab Rockmann, it’s not gonna be good.* I pull out the Cudgel of the Goddess, the *Dare Labdos*, from my belt, and step out in front of Rockmann and the others.

“Rockmann! Take the princess and—ahhhh!”

“Nanalie!”

One of the creature’s tentacles has wrapped around my leg—and it’s dangling me in the air! The sensation of the slimy slick against my ankles gives me goosebumps.

Benjamin extends her hand, but I’m already out of her reach.

“My Lazie! I ha’e vinally goot ye!”

“I am not anyone’s ‘lady’!”

“I can vinally, vinally return you to the Lord of the Sea!”

The “Lord of the Sea”?

I, dangling midair, try everything I can think of to get out of this thing’s slimy grip: I use magic to send pillars of ice stabbing into its flank, I whack the Cudgel

of the Goddess against the tentacles, I try squirming out of its hold—but nothing works.

It isn't just magic that has no effect on this thing—not a single type of attack hurt it at all! Is it invincible? All spells are totally ineffective against it, just like a couplet flower.

I'd read before that magic doesn't work on animals that live in the Land of the Sea, nor its resident mermaids. *Maybe it doesn't work on this creature, just like it doesn't work on them?*

Nikeh and Satanás are trying their best to get me free of the tentacles, but the blades they conjure to cut me free have no effect on the leviathan.

“Why doesn't magic work against it?!”

“Hel!”

Rockmann's racing through the air on his familiar Yuri. He grabs my arm firmly as he flies past me.

Here I am, a damsel in distress...literally being rescued by this bastard. Losing, again. And in such an embarrassing manner! The mix of emotions is too much for me to process. Hold on—it's bringing me towards the water, isn't it? What about the princess?

I look over at the beach to see that she's being protected by both her guards and a thin, glowing magical barrier.

“Ah! R-Rockmann! Let me go!”

The strange creature shouts at him as well. “I von't hert my lazies! I shan't be violent! I zoo not lie! Let *goo*, bvoys!” Another tentacle shoots around to latch onto Yuri, pulling Rockmann and me away from each other.

This is bad. At this rate, it won't just take me, but him too.

“Just let it do what it wants!” I cry out, “It's confused! It's saying it won't hurt me, so get back to the princess and escape while there's still time!”

“I don't take orders from *you*.”

My arm feels like it's going to be ripped to shreds. I feel my face contort in

agony from the pain of being yanked in opposite directions.

In that moment, Rockmann looks more concerned and frustrated than I've ever seen him before. For a moment I forget the pain, blinking as if to verify the look on his face is real.



“Wait for me,” he says. He yanks a gold ring off his left pinky with his teeth, and puts it on the ring finger of my left hand. “I *will* come for you.”

And with that, he lets go. I am instantly pulled into the sea by the leviathan, and down we go.

Strangely enough, I can breathe just fine.

The last thing I see before my vision goes dark is a flickering crimson light above me, surrounded with waves of gold.

* * * *

After the great splash of water, after the roiling waters of the sea slowly grow calm, everything is as it had been moments ago. With the disappearance of the strange creature back into the sea, the tourists and local residents who had fled the scene come back to the beach, visibly relieved to find all as it should be.

All is as it should be—except that Nanalie is nowhere to be seen.

Alois jumps down from Yuri’s back. Satanás immediately starts pressing him for answers, yelling “Why the hell did you let her go?!”

Nikeh and the others, who’d found themselves scattered across the beach over the course of the fight, hurry over to where Satanás is getting up in Alois’s face about what’s just happened.

“The waters off the coast here are most likely part of that creature’s ‘territory.’ Or it might even have been an animal sent here from the Land of the Sea—they use a completely different kind of magic down there, so in that case it would make sense that our spells had no effect on it.”

“I ain’t asking you about *any* of that shit, you idiot!”

“Ouch. All that yelling of yours must’ve busted my hearing.”

Alois winces at the sharp ringing in his ears and begins making his way towards Bella, who is standing further up the beach, protected by a magical barrier. Satanás keeps badgering him all the while. Alois responds only half-heartedly to the repeated pestering and slaps on the shoulder—he’s clearly distracted as he swiftly makes his way across the sand. It’s difficult to say, however, whether he is distracted by his concern for the princess... or for

someone else.

Bella, surrounded by her guards, watches Alois approach with tears in her eyes. He bows, then kneels before her, inquiring about her health before giving her a small, reassuring smile.

“Bella,” he says, “are you hurt?”

“No, thanks to you.”

“Lady Bella,” calls out a guard, “I recommend we return to the palace now.”

“W-Wait, please!” Nikeh cries as she and Benjamine run up to where Alois is kneeling before the princess. The two young women can hardly believe that the princess and the guards would so easily abandon one of their friends to some watery end at the hands—or rather, tentacles—of a mysterious beast.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Benjamine says to the princess, slightly out of breath, “but this is serious. How can y’all just head on back to the palace like nothing happened, when the only reason that *thing* kidnapped Nanalie is because it thought she was *you*?!”

Nikeh nods. “Yeah! How are we ever going to save Nanalie if you’re just going to leave?!”

“And if our spells weren’t working,” Benjamine says, looking more and more worried, “we don’t even know if she’s still *breathing* down there in the water!”

“Oh,” Nikeh says, shaking her head, “I can’t bear the thought of her drowning! To have her first trip outside Doran end like this... Who could have imagined it’d turn out so *awful*?” She recalls the conversation she and Nanalie had just had moments ago:

“Let’s pretend we didn’t see them.”

“Yeah, sounds good. If you two meet, there’s bound to be trouble, anyway.”

This is what happens every time Alois and Nanalie meet, she thinks, fireworks, arguments, chaos, or worse. She presses a palm against her forehead. I never should’ve dragged her over to see him.

Satanás is looking out at the sea. “Don’t bother asking *them*,” he says quietly. “We’ll go save Nanalie, just the three of us.” *We’re fully-fledged mages*

ourselves, aren't we? If it's our friend who's in trouble, we're gonna be the ones to save her. He pats Benjamine's head.

"Naru..." she says, looking up at him, eyes full of admiration. He beckons for his familiar, and it looks like he is just about to climb up on her back and begin soaring the skies—when Alois stops him in his tracks.

"Have you given *any thought at all* as to how you're actually going to *find* her?"

No longer kneeling, Alois has stood up and folded his arms, sounding thoroughly exasperated with Satanás.

He has a point.

Without being able to use magic, they'd never be able to sense Nanalie in the waters below them, nor would they be able to conduct their search underwater. Even Nikeh's abilities as a Water-type would likely be totally inadequate for a manhunt on the high seas.

"We won't know unless we try, right?" Satanás says, frowning at Rockmann. "It ain't got nothin' to do with you anyway. We're going, no matter what."

Nikeh calmly lays a hand on his shoulder. "Hold on there, Satanás—that's no way to talk to him after what just happened. I know you're angry, but didn't you see? The first person to try to rescue her was the Cap—was Rockmann." She points at Benjamine. "You'd let her go if it prevented *her* arm from being torn to shreds, wouldn't you?"

"...That's got nothin' to do with it," Satanás mutters darkly. Averting his gaze from everyone else, in a manner rather unbecoming of his age, he begins pouting.

He isn't blind to the realities of the situation—Alois *had* tried to save Nanalie. Still, at the critical moment in the fight, in a moment when Nanalie might have *died* (and she still might end up dead after all), Alois had been the one to let go of her hand. That fact alone is enough to make him furious. *Not only did he let go of her*, he thinks, *but she might be in more danger, right now, as we waste time talking about this!* He is itching to jump on his familiar's back and begin searching for her right away.

Satanás may possess only about half the common sense of an average person, but he is more devoted to his friends than anyone else is. Benjamine knew this was true. “He knows you’re right,” she says to Alois. “That’s why he’s lashing out. Sorry.”

But Alois knows Satanás well enough to expect this sort of attitude, and isn’t angry at him at all, merely giving him a small, somewhat pained smile. He turns away from his sulking friend and gently takes the hand of the princess.

“Bella, I’d like to have an audience with the King today—could that be arranged?”

“He should be back at the palace before sunset. What do you want to talk with him about?”

“I’m going to request he allow me to continue my investigation.”

“What? Your ‘investigation’...? Hold up, not even *Borizurie* was able to get there! You really think you can break through that seastorm?!” Bella is panicked at the very suggestion. Her sandy-white hair flutters in the coastal winds.

She’d spoken with the intention of criticizing Alois and his plans—but he understands quite well just how foolhardy his proposition sounds. “Regardless of the danger,” he nods, “if I do not pass through that storm, I’ll never find what I’m after.”

“Ever since they sealed off their waters twenty years ago, there’s not been a single person who’s spoken with one from the Land of the Sea, or so my mother tells me. My father’s been sheltering you and Zenon in his castle because he’s fond of the two of you, and for you to insist on going anyway... I know it’s my fault your friend was taken away, but still...”

The reason Alois and his two subordinates have still not completed their survey of the Land of the Sea is that they’d been denied entry at the border, quite forcefully in fact, and members of their reconnaissance corps had been injured in the process.

It’s a bit misleading on the part of the Princess, however, to describe what happened to them as being “denied entry.” Should any human try to enter the territorial waters of the Land of the Sea, the weather would suddenly take a

dramatic turn for the worse. No spells would work against the oncoming storm, and no magical barrier would protect them from the driving rains and winds, not to mention the viciously wild strikes of lightning. It had been this storm phenomenon that stopped their investigation.

The wounds inflicted by the storm, furthermore, were resistant to healing by magic. According to the terms of the Emergency Aid Agreement they'd signed with the Seleinian Kingdom before heading out to sea, they had been allowed to return to Seleina in order to recuperate. Their investigation isn't wholly sponsored by Doran's neighboring countries, however—all of the realms in the region have agreed to cooperate with the investigation and provide all necessary assistance to see their mission fulfilled.

The Knights of Vestanu, led by Captain Borizurie, had themselves gone out to continue the investigation after the Doran group had failed to break through the storm, but they'd met the same fate: storms, injuries, and a long recuperation in the Seleina Kingdom.

The Land of the Sea is known as a place where magic simply does not work.

But both Alois and Weldy had been unpleasantly surprised by the discovery made just now: even in the shallows just off the shoreline, magic had failed to have any effect on the creature from the Sea.

"Still, the whole situation is a bit fishy," Zenon says. "How did that sea creature know that the princess was standing here on land? If it could sense that much, surely it wouldn't mistake its target once it arrived at the beach." Zenon had come to Seleina to hear the details about the failed expedition of the Doran investigative unit. He'd never dreamed that one of his friends would be captured right in front of him, but he shows no signs of panic. With a measured calm, he tries to think of the best course of action for them to take.

"Bella, would you happen to have any idea as to why that thing would mistake my friend for you?"

"An idea? About that?"

Alois recalls what the giant beast said. "It said something about the 'Lord of the Sea'—that must have referred to the Sea King, King Celestial. And then something about how it could 'finally return my Lady'—do you have any idea

what he was talking about?”

“Beats me... I’m only nineteen years old. The last time Seleina hosted an envoy from the Land of the Sea was before I was born. What I *know* is a lot less than what I *don’t* know.” She rests one hand on her chin as she thinks. “I honestly have no idea what it was talking about,” she says, groaning in frustration. “The only thing I ever heard from my parents was that a long time ago, King Celestial would often come to the shore and give gifts to us—not that I have any idea what those gifts were, though.”

“That so?” Alois says, lost in thought. If she didn’t know, the only way to find answers to Alois’s questions would be to ask the King of Seleina directly. He nods to himself. The King would surely remember something from his interactions with the Sea King, all those years ago.

Together, Alois, Satanás, and all the others get on their mounts and fly up to where Castle Seleina floats in the sky.

* * * *

The roofs of the castle are round and gold. The walls are white, but seem almost blue when seen from certain angles.

Before them stands the storied Castle Seleina, built hundreds of years ago and home of the Seleinian royal family for generations. The structure is surrounded with thick green vegetation that lines the stone avenue leading up to the front gate.

“This is pretty big,” says Benjamine. Satanás and Nikeh are walking alongside her. Nearby, they hear the sudden *piiiikrrr!* cry of some large bird. With the permission of the princess, all three of the travelers cross the threshold into the castle. Alois, Weldy, and the other Knight from Doran are already inside.

Sunlight shines through the castle windows at an angle that makes it appear as if the floor is pure gemstone. The three of them, commoners all, tiptoe their way down the hall behind the others.

“This is ridiculous!” Nikeh whispers to her two friends. “We flew right up here, with no invitation from the King, because we’re in a hurry! We don’t have time to be dilly-dallying in fancy castle corridors when our friend’s in trouble!”

Benjamine grimaces as she nods her head in agreement, but she can't totally discount Alois's motivations for taking the time to meet with the King before searching for Nanalie. Satanás, walking next to her, is still sulking that he hadn't gotten his way back down on the beach. She quickly gives his hand an affectionate squeeze before he joins in on the complaining.

Zenon slows down a little to walk alongside Nikeh. "Calm down, Nikeh. If you aren't careful, you'll end up like curly-hair over there."

"Begging your pardon, Your Highness, but is this really the time to make jokes like that?!"

Nikeh balls up her fists in frustration at Zenon's teasing. She'd spoken rather loudly. Zenon winces at the noise and tenderly pats her on the back until she has calmed down a little. He hadn't intended to make her angry, but he supposes that nothing he says right now is going to make her feel better—*She's going to be on edge every moment until we find Nanalie, isn't she?* He sighs.

The interior of the palace is blue, white, and gold. The six subjects of Doran look around and see that the walls have unfamiliar forms of writing carved into them, the letters patterned into certain designs that decorate the hall. Most of the written characters are curved and circular in shape. There are also some engraved images of people with fishtails instead of legs. The engravings aren't colored, however, so unless you look closely it is difficult to tell what the images depict.

"My father's waiting for you inside Palace Chamber Fourteen."

"Thanks. Sorry for the sudden request."

"Arranging an audience with my father is the least I can do to help your friend."

"You haven't started hating the sea, have you? After what just happened."

"Oh, don't worry about *me*. A long time ago, I almost got eaten by a big fish, and what happened on the beach was nothing compared to that."

"That sounds rough. I've heard that the bigger the fish, the tastier it is."

"If a big fish ate me, would you kill it and eat it up, the meat all *wet* and

juicy?”

Alois slides one arm around Bella’s waist, trying to keep her in as good a mood as possible. This isn’t their home kingdom, but somewhere else entirely—they can’t expect King Seleina to be as accommodating of their request as King Doran might be. It’s not like Alois could have gotten *anything* he wanted from King Doran, but it would have been much easier to ask him instead of a foreign King hosting him inside his own castle. No one wants to be thought of as an imposing guest, after all.

What Alois hasn’t quite picked up on, however, is that Bella is going to be happy as long as she is with him. With her help, their situation is not as desperate as it might have been. After all, hasn’t she at this very moment acted as a mediator between him and the King, arranging an audience at a mere moment’s notice?

It’s all thanks to Alois being so popular with women that we’re being helped right now, Zenon thinks, continuing to hold one arm over Nikeh’s shoulder. He watches Alois and Bella flirt as they make their way down the hallway. *Let’s just hope the King is so eager to help us as well.*

* * * *

“Rumor has it that the daughter of the Sea King eloped with a human man.”

The man’s brilliantly white royal garb stands in sharp contrast to his sun-darkened skin. He looks to be in his mid-fifties, and from the way in which he leans back into the throne, legs crossed, one knows at a glance that this is most certainly the master of the castle.

Zenon and Alois are the only ones from Doran to be allowed an audience with the King. As such, inside Palace Chamber Fourteen they are joined only by Bella and King Seleina. The other four subjects of Doran have been left sitting in the waiting room, looking none too happy about the situation. Before the glittering golden throne of the Seleinian King, Zenon and Alois bow low as they greet him.

He must have heard about the whole situation from Bella before they’d come in, since the very first words out of his mouth had been about the daughter of the Sea King.

“It all happened twenty years ago. They all searched high and low for her, but she was nowhere to be found. There is no spell that can turn a mermaid into a human, of course, but the Sea King believed there was, and it had been used on his precious daughter. That’s why he closed off his territorial waters to all humans, supposedly.”

“Twenty years ago, you say?”

The Sea King’s daughter had run away with a human man. The story sounded like something out of a fairytale. Zenon and Alois look at each other and tilt their heads to the side in thought. The creature from the sea had referred to Nanalie as “My Lady,” presumably mistaking her for the daughter of the Sea King. But Nanalie wasn’t his daughter, and neither was Bella.

Setting aside the matter of whether the rumors of elopement were *true* or not, Alois still needed to enter the Land of the Sea. “Might there be some way inside his Kingdom? Any way at all?”

“I would not object to loaning you Hownyok to help you get there. He lives under this very palace.”

“Hownyok?”

“Hownyok was a gift from the Sea King himself, given to an ancestor of mine as a symbol of their friendship. The creature has protected the waters around Seleina for many years, but even I find the Rogue Fish to be a bit...strange.”

Hownyok, “The Rogue Fish.” Should a human be covered with its phlegm, they would instantly become able to breathe underwater. The sea creature serves the Seleinian throne by saving drowning swimmers and shipwrecked crews off the coast.

The big fish that had almost eaten Bella is none other than Hownyok.

“Are you two familiar with the story of ‘*Genesis*’?”

“Yes,” Zenon says, “I have heard the tale before, sir.” Alois nods his head as well.

“Genesis” is a collection of stories that had been compiled and edited millennia ago by a bard. They were set in ages long past, when the only beings

in the world had been those spirits said to be the distant ancestors of mages: Fire, Water, Earth, Wind, Lightning, and Ice.

The first chapter of the collection contained a story relating how five of the spirits had, while playing one day, created the Shadow Spirit. As a result, Ice, which had been the only spirit not to contribute to its creation, used all of her power to freeze it, shatter it, and send the shards flying to the four winds. These shards would later become the seeds for the demons that lurked in the dark corners of the world.

Bereft of her power, Ice died, and her spirit left this world, or so the first chapter concluded.

The author of this story, the poet Perieve, had included an attempt to explain why Ice-types were the rarest of all elemental affinities.

“That story was written thousands of years ago. Around here, however, there is another legend: Ice, the only one whose power the Dark Spirit did not possess, is not gone from this world, but merely in a deep sleep, slumbering down in the Land of the Sea. Just a rumor though, mind you.”

Bella, sitting next to the King, perks up when she hears this. Her mother told her the story of Genesis when she was little, but she hadn’t mentioned Ice sleeping at the bottom of the ocean. “Isn’t that just another fairytale?”

“The Land of the Sea is said to be the home of *Water*,” he says. “Why Ice should be said to be sleeping down there is a mystery to me. It is no fairytale, daughter, only a whispered rumor.”

He looks back at the two young men before him. “If this demon you tell me of, the one who spoke of a ‘Städal,’ truly went in search of the Land of the Sea, then ‘Städal’ is likely another demon. I believe it might even be in search of *that power* which slipped out of its grasp, all those years ago...

“King Celestial resides in a place entirely beyond our ken. Humanity cannot penetrate the defenses he has placed around his realm, nor can we reside there ourselves. From our perspective, then, he has all the power of some great beast, a force of nature...and he isn’t particularly old, from what I recall.”

King Seleina falls silent and motions for the kneeling Alois and Zenon to stand

up. “Move near the walls,” he commands. Once they have done so, he grasps the left armrest of the throne—and pulls it upwards.

GRGRGRGR... The floor instantly begins to shake and rumble. A large round hole opens up in the center of Palace Chamber Fourteen, revealing—

“Water? Is that the sea?”

Zenon can’t believe his eyes. He squints down at the water. Beneath the surface, some great black shadow is moving.

King Seleina, having checked to see that the shadow has come to a halt in the center of the pool, points at the two young men and says:

“You must enter the belly of Hownyok. Don’t forget to swallow one of these Ames pearls first, however.”

KER-SPLASH!

The great fish erupts out of the water in a shower of droplets that pelt the ceiling. Keeping just its head above the surface, its two massive eyes look left and right as it watches Alois and Zenon.

* * * *

The world around me is wavering, uncertain.

I feel as though I’m sleeping in a cradle once again, or even back inside my mother’s belly, surrounded by a calm, comforting warmth.

Something gently rubs my cheek. Slowly, I feel myself rise to the surface of consciousness.

The lethargy in my bones makes it feel like I’ve been asleep for a long, long time in complete darkness, but am now taking my first step back out into the light.

I blink several times as I focus my gaze on my surroundings.

I’m lying down. I am resting on something soft beneath me...not cloth, but as comfortable and gentle as a baby’s cheek. It’s as red as my lips.

I slowly sit up and look around.

What I see is a beautiful, blue world, dappled with light. The blue color is not

the same as the sky above, but just as brilliant and clear.

I'm resting on what appears to be a bed. The bed frame seems to be made of seashells, just like those I'd seen on the beach.

Around me I see strange shapes, star-like objects lying here and there, and everywhere else, long swaying strands of... "grass" are growing.

That said, I am certainly in a room, inside. *Indoor grass...?*

The room's white walls have a glossy luster to them, as if I had fallen asleep inside a conch shell.

I look up at the ceiling. Up there, I spot fishes and other animals swimming, swimming, swimming, like nothing I've ever seen before.

My hair, which had been tied up in a bun, is now hanging loose...but the weight of it feels different than before.

It's floating freely around my head, like it would if I was underwater.

"....."

I think to myself for a moment, then try forcefully waving my arms around from side to side.

—*swishswishswish*.

There's some resistance, and a few bubbles.

That doesn't feel like air against my skin. It feels like my arms are submerged in lukewarm water—

"Huh? —Huuuuuuuh?!"

I'm underwater.

"What is this place?"

Every time I open my mouth, bubbles slip out.

I've no idea what happened after I was dragged into the sea. I'm not seeing that freaky beast lurking around here either.

The moment I realized I was underwater, I clamped my hands over my mouth. Well, I relax, slowly lowering them, *it does seem like I can breathe down here,*

somehow, so I guess there's no need to worry about that.

I'm so glad I'm not dead. There are still so many things I want to do that I haven't done yet. It'd be totally awful to die in a weird place like this.

I wonder how Nikeh and Benjamine are doing now. Right when we finally managed to go on a vacation together, here I am, getting myself kidnapped. How inconvenient for them.

"Oh, shoot! I didn't finish organizing the materials room before I left!"

My job! What am I going to do about work! It's only been one year since I started working as a receptionist lady. What if I can't get out of here? How am I going to explain my absence to the Director? She asked me directly to relabel all of the books in the materials room, and I'd planned on finishing up when I got back, but now—! She's gonna kill me...

I only have three more days off, and I still haven't bought any souvenirs for Zozo or any of the others at Harré. I also haven't collected any of the colorful shells from the Seleinian beach Cheena said she wanted. Then there's 'Pirkl Milk,' that Seleina Kingdom specialty dessert that the Director told me she wanted. Haven't got that either...

In just a few more months, I would've saved up enough money to be financially secure, too. I let out a sigh. I can't stand the idea that I'm never going to accomplish that savings goal—but I'm not about to let myself die in a place like this!

Or so I think to myself, but I still have absolutely no idea where I am, or what direction home might be. I try using a bit of magic, just to see if anything happens—nothing.

"Shhhhhshshsh."

I'm sitting stock still, lost in my thoughts, when I hear a—sound? voice?—something coming from the hole in the ceiling.

I look up and see an animal with the torso of a human man, but the head and tail of a fish. It descends to float before me, and I feel myself pushed back a little by the currents caused by its forceful strokes through the water.

“A fish?”

Or is this perhaps a merperson? It's quite different from anything I ever heard about in stories, or saw in picture books or thoughtographs.

Both of its eyes swerve around to goggle at me.

“Shshh, shhsh.”

It's opening and closing its mouth. I do believe it is trying to talk to me. The only thing I can hear is that “shhh” sound, though. With those gestures it's making with its arms, it's obvious it wants to tell me something, but I've no idea what that might be with all that “shhhh”-ing.

“Sh? Shh!”

I tilt my head to one side in confusion. *Damn, I forgot*, or so his facial expression seems to say, as he—the fishperson?—claps his hands together and then pulls out a small white marble from somewhere. He holds it out to me.

Take it, he seems to be saying, gesturing repeatedly with his other hand. When I do so, he points at me, then mimes something with his throat. *Am I supposed to swallow this? Some mysterious marble handed to me by a stranger? What if it's poison?*

“Nglp?!” The fishperson forced the marble into my mouth and without intending to, I swallowed it. *This sucks. Is this how I die?*

“Shshshh! Shshhhhurry up and eat it!”

“Ah! You made me swallow that thing! Ug! Wait, hold on—”

The creature's voice, which up until a moment ago had sounded like an irritable librarian shushing the life out of me, now sounded like actual, normal words. He was speaking with a man's—boy's?—voice.

I draw back in surprise—but the fishperson grabs my arm and pulls me towards him. My loose, waving hair floats in front of my face.

“You look like my older sister, but you aren't her.”

“Huh?”

“Since Nanyok brought you, though, you must've smelled the same... Are you

related to her? Did she get married? Did she abandon me for a human man?!”

I understand the *words* he’s saying, but I have no idea what he’s trying to communicate.

“Well, whatever. Father says that I’ve got to mate with you instead.”

“Um, I have *no idea what you’re talking about!*”

I pick up a large shell lying nearby and throw it at him, creating an opening for me to escape.

Good grief! Give me a break with all this kidnapping nonsense! If I can breathe, it seems like now’s the only chance I’ve got to run away—in a flurry, I kick, kick, kick my legs as I swim away from him.

He grabs my legs tightly. I’m not escaping him. *I should’ve known better than to try something stupid like swimming away from a fishperson. Damn those fast flippy fins!*

“I’m taking you to see the Sea King.”

“The Sea King? Do you mean—King Celestial?”

That monster fish had mentioned the Sea King as well.

Based on what I’ve read, if I can assume that I am now in the Land of the Sea, where the mermaids live, and this guy’s referring to the lord who rules the sea, then he’s probably—no, definitely—talking about the Sea King, King Celestial.

Once I’d seen a book that described how the “tempests and tranquilities of the sea turned in time to the tune of his tempers.” Should he get angry, the seas would get rough; should he be happy, the waves would be gentle; should he be sad, all the waters would still, and so on and so forth. “*The soul of the sea and the soul of its King are one,*” or so I’d read.

“Oh, you know about King Celestial? Good. That means I don’t have to explain. Let’s go.”

“W-W-Wait up there! I’m pretty sure you’ve got the wrong person? And where am I, anyway?”

“You’re in my older sister’s room.”

“That’s not what I’m asking! Hold on, who’s your older—ahh!”

The fishperson yanks on my arm and pulls me right out of the room through the hole in the roof.

What the hell is this guy’s problem? He’s not answering any of my questions! Bubbles of air burble out of my mouth as he drags me out the ceiling, but once I see what’s outside, I’m completely taken aback.

“What...*is* all this?”

There’s a white palace glowing before me, bigger than any castle I’ve ever seen before. *What kind of people can create such massive works of art?* Several colossal pillars ring the mountainous, seashell-like tower that spirals upwards, golden dots of light leaking out from the oval windows and passageways dotting its exterior. The structure appears to have gemstones laid into its walls, for they take the light falling from the sea above and reflect it in every direction, glittering rainbows fluttering across the sea floor. Massive shells can be seen attached to the palace here and there, some tight spirals, some thin and flat. Around the entire structure grow pale blue and red weeds, as well as some golden ones arranged all in some careful design, as if they were the King’s flower garden.

In the distance, I hear what sounds like music, beautiful notes trilling up and down the scales. A school of fish zooms across our path as we approach the palace.

“Don’t you get it?” the fishperson said. “That room you were in is a part of all this.”

The room I was in...is merely one room of this giant, giant castle.

“Welcome,” he says, puffing out his chest in pride as he continues to pull me along, “to the Hidden Castle of the Lord of the Sea, my great father, King Celestial. Welcome to Palace Oceanus.”

The Sea. It’s everything I’ve always dreamed of.

I look down at my left hand, the hand the fishperson is grabbing onto. Still on my ring finger is that loop of gold Rockmann had put there before letting me go.

If only I were here sightseeing, I think. My friends and I could have had so much fun here.

And so I'm taken by the hand, by some mysterious fishperson, to the King of it all.

* * * *

Frankly, I must say I have neither a particular like nor dislike for fish. What I like and dislike is a bit of a moot point anyway, as Doran doesn't border a sea, which means there are not too many fish to be eaten back home.

I do, however, often see fish in the river that runs through town, and there *are* fish sold in the markets. When I haven't felt like eating meat, I *have* whipped up a seafood dish or two for myself, from scratch. If it's available, I'll eat it, if not, I won't make a fuss. It's nice but not necessary.

Starting today, though, I don't think I'll ever be able to eat fish again. I rub one hand against my exposed belly. I think it's a sign just how overwhelming the current situation is that it's making me consider swearing off a whole category of food.

"My son, will you never learn?" A deep, deep voice resounds in the waters around me. I don't so much as *hear* the voice as I *feel* it, all the way down in my gut. I tilt my head upwards to make out the speaker.

I look up to see the (human) face of a merman, with thick, regal eyebrows and a beard that stretches all the way down to his waist. *This is no "fishperson"—this is a merman, just like the ones I've seen in picture books.*

The man—merman—is sitting on something that looks like a throne, and is looking down at me from his seat. The merman looks to be about three times as large as I am.

Not only is he tall, but his throne is so much higher than I am.

He's unquestionably larger than the fishperson who brought me here. *I don't think it's physically possible for a human to even be that large.*

I just hope he lets me go back to Seleina, or anywhere above water, as soon as possible. It's all just a big mistake that I'm here after all. I look up at the big

merman, praying that he can see my request written across my face.

I can't use any magic, so I've got to rely on the merpeople if I'm ever going to get out of here. Of course, I'd really rather not rely on them, but it doesn't look like I've got any other options.

"Maiteiah," he says, "you never gave up on finding her, did you?"

"Never, sire. Not once."

"Maiteiah" seems to be the name of the fishperson who's dragged me before the King. *Not that I need to know who he is in order to escape.*

I am standing inside the palace, before the throne of the King. It's painfully obvious, however, that this bizarre situation was not set up so that I could complain to or make demands of him, so I stay quiet.

The first thing I saw upon entering the throne room were the beautiful mermaids with their glossy, lustrous, blue and red hair. The mermen scattered among them look exactly like the fishperson who'd met me in "my room." All of them are lined up in rows near the throne. Strangely enough, however, while all of them are "standing" upright, facing the King, they all have their eyes closed. The only people with their eyes open in the room appear to be me, the fishperson, and the King.

I must say I'm glad I didn't put on my normal clothes this morning, I think, nodding to myself. Not that I had any idea what today would bring. If I hadn't worn this bathing suit, with its bathing shorts, and instead worn my usual skirt... I shudder at the thought. The fabric would have floated up and shown my underwear off to everyone. It's not like it'd be the end of the world or anything like that, but obviously I'd prefer other people to see as little of my underwear as possible.

That said, I don't think I'd be out of place or embarrassed here among the merpeople, even if I had just arrived in my underwear... The merpeople around me are dressed in a fashion that leaves very little to the imagination.

"No matter what Nefertieah does, she will never return here. Bringing her doppelganger before me shall not change my opinion on this matter."

Were I allowed to be my usual self, I'd be running around this room looking at

everything and trying to figure out what it was...but I definitely can't allow myself to do that given the present circumstances.

I bet Nikeh, Benjamine, and the others are all worried about me. Don't suppose he'd hurry up and just let me go...? I turn my head sideways to give the coldest glare I can muster at the fishperson standing next to me, desperately trying to persuade the King that there is some point in my being here.

"But Father! If Nanyok brought her here, that must mean she's a close relation of my older sister or—"

"Silence! I cringe to hear such nonsense. Antics like these are why you are still just a fingerling."

A "fingerling"? This fishperson is...a fingerling?

According to what I've read, mermen turn into adults only after they've found their mate. I hadn't come across any descriptions as to what fingerlings looked like, however, so I'm not entirely sure what the King's basing his accusation on. *Just guessing here, but from what I can see of the other mermen, some of them have beautiful human faces, not the fish ones this guy has. They must gain their human faces once they turn into adults.*

"Human girl. Do you know where you are?"

"Oh, uh, m-m-m-me, sir?"

I'm shaken by the sudden question. I nervously twitch my limbs in the water a bit, uncertain how to react. *He asks me if I know where I am—but for the first time since I've left Doran, I can only guess based on what I can see. I don't have my travel magazine with me anymore. I doubt it would have had any information concerning the Land of the Sea anyway...*

It takes me a minute to answer his question. I've been seeing the merpeople, seeing the palace underwater, and guessing all the while—the answer's clear:

"The...Land of the Sea?"

"Technically speaking, you are in the Kingdom of the Deep Sea."

Isn't that the same thing? I swallow those words before they come out of my mouth, and simply look up at the big merman.

“I am he who rules the seas of this world, the Sea King Celestial.”

Upon those words from the big merman—the Sea King—he comes down from his throne to approach where the fishperson and I are floating. I’m about to be forced back by the water displaced by his movements, but before that can happen the Sea King himself gently places a hand behind my back to prevent me from getting swept away.

This guy is enormous. Just his hand alone covers my entire back.

Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I’d wondered if this guy *really* was the Sea King or not—but with this simple gesture of consideration, and his royally large hands, I know he is telling the truth. “Thank you, King Celestial,” I say. He gives me a friendly smile, like that of an old man from my childhood neighborhood. “You are welcome,” he says, nodding.

“It would be easy to return you now to your home, but I wish to avoid frequent comings and goings of humans to my waters. Until your friends arrive here to meet you, I bid you to make your time down here pleasant and useful.”

“My friends?”

Is he talking about Nikeh, Benjamine, and the others? “S-Sir,” I stutter out of fear, “how might you know my friends are coming?”

“I know everything that *has* ever happened, or *will* ever happen, down here in the sea.”

My goodness. I’ve heard my share of rumors about the Sea King, but to think he can really know all that? He’s beyond anything a human is capable of. Not even Rockmann would be able to take him on.

I’m not the type to just sit here and wait patiently until my friends arrive, though. If possible, I’d like to escape all by myself. I don’t want to inconvenience anyone else. Well, perhaps trying to do everything myself is what’s causing everybody the inconvenience, I suppose. Still, while he did say they are coming (Now, or in the future? Was that a fact or a prophecy?), I’m not entirely sure he was telling—or knows—the truth.

“Wait for me. I will come for you.”

Goddess above. Does he really think that by saying something like that, I'm just going to believe him?

Well, I guess I am doing what he asked—waiting, here. After all, I'm not trying to do anything crazy to escape, right? But I'm not obeying his orders, or believing he'll come through on his promise to me, or anything else. No way. I'm simply choosing to trust that what the Sea King says is true.

So that's why I absolutely, absolutely did not need this, Rockmann. Why did you give me this ring anyway?

I take it off my ring finger and try it on my pinky. *Too loose.* I try putting it on my middle finger, my index finger, and my thumb, but it's too small for any of them. I end up putting it back on the ring finger of my left hand.

"Ah," the Sea King says, watching me fiddle with my ring. "That is a Dorseim Wisdom."

"This ring?" I ask. He lifts up my hand to take a closer look. His grip is rather tight. *What am I going to do if he breaks my arm?*

A "Dorseim Wisdom" is a mysterious type of ring that comes from a country west of Doran. The rings can be used in hundreds of different ways, depending on what the wielder wishes to do with it. Stretch it vertically and it can turn into a bow capable of shooting arrows, throw it at a target and it can have all the force of a bullet, twist it sideways and it can be used as a rope. There are many such uses for the ring.

It is said that the Dorseim people who live to the west are the ones who made them. The Dorseim have pointed ears, are of small stature, and are highly intelligent. Or they were, until they all perished hundreds of years ago. Their creators gone, the rare Dorseim rings are purchased by the wealthy for large sums every time a new one is discovered somewhere.

Why would he have something like this?

I suppose he is a pampered rich guy, so it's not too strange he would have one...but why would he give it to me?

"The Dorseim people wielded a special type of magic, different from that of you or I. I'm sure it will come in handy even down here in the sea."

What in the world were you thinking, Rockmann? Pushing dangerously magical jewelry into my hand? Did you know?

Now that I think back on that moment, it was almost like he had given it to me instinctively. *Perhaps he hadn't thought about me using it down here in the Sea Kingdom—but that seems unlikely. I feel like I saw him use it in the battle on the beach.* I pause, horrified as I realize something else. *Am I now in his debt? Because he gave me this ring?* Despite the pleasant warmth of the water around me, I shiver.

“Um, he mentioned ‘Nanyok’ earlier? What’s that?”

I ask the King about the curious creature that had captured me. I haven’t been able to get that thing out of my head ever since it traumatized me with that shockingly sudden kidnapping.

The Sea King smiles. “Ah! Nanyok. It is like a...custodian of the sea. A strange creature that eats all the filth and waste on the seafloor. It keeps my domain clean, every day, without fail.”

There’s one other thing I need to ask him about: the person who I was mistaken for. I ask him about her in an indirect fashion, so as not to come off as rude and nosy.

“I had a daughter,” he says, “but she left home a long time ago. I know she will never return. Nanyok, however, said he would go looking for her. Ever since then, he has been looking and looking. I told him ‘enough!’ many times, but he wouldn’t listen to me.”

“But don’t you want to see your daughter again?”

He strokes his white beard for a few moments before speaking. “A woman may choose to always be looking at a certain man, or, she may choose to never be looking at him. If you think about it, those are two sides of the same coin, differing in form but identical in motivation. Love is a mysterious thing, don’t you think?”

The Sea King smiles down at me, cheerful as can be.

The Sea King told me that I can go “tour the Land of the Sea” if I’d like, so that’s what I’m doing now—only, that fishperson is accompanying me, so I can’t

relax and enjoy the sights.

“Don’t act so scared,” he says.

“What do you expect me to do? Shouldn’t I be scared when I’m with the fish that is my captor?”

Well, that’s what I say, at least, but I’m not actually scared of him. It’s just that now that I’m *finally* in the Land of the Sea, I’d really rather be by myself, going around and seeing everything at my own pace.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about. I won’t do anything to you. We can’t lie, you know.”

Now where have I heard that line before? Didn’t that huge monster that grabbed me off the beach also say something like, “I’m not lying,” or whatever?

“Lying and killing are forbidden inside the Sea Kingdom. Our magic isn’t like yours—you use incantations, but for us, *every word we speak* is magic. We have to take responsibility for everything we say.”

He goes on to explain further.

“You heard me talk back when I first came to get you from where you were sleeping, right? Our language is unique—it only has *one* sound in it. Somewhere along the line, back in our past, as we tried and tried to communicate with each other, our words came to possess magical power, all on their own. Of course, we don’t actually *do magic* unless we intend to, and thanks to the Sea King’s decree, no one can use magic to harm others inside the Kingdom. Still, our magic can still cause other effects, especially on ourselves. We can completely hypnotize ourselves, just by talking.”

“You hypnotize yourselves?”

“Yeah. Let me think of an example... Oh, here’s a good one: Let’s say I’m hungry, but I tell myself quite firmly that I’m *not*. My sense of hunger will quickly go away. Also, if I do something bad, but then I insist to myself, verbally, that I *didn’t*, then my memory of that action will disappear, and I’ll actually believe I haven’t done anything bad. That’s why it’s so dangerous for us to tell falsehoods—if we keep on lying to ourselves, we’ll lose our sense of self, our identity. We could also end up starving ourselves to death by endlessly

distracting ourselves from our hunger.”

The world is much bigger than I know, with more types of magic in it than I could possibly imagine. I really don't know very much at all, do I? I look down at my hands, unable to cast a single spell under the sea.

We're swimming along at a quick pace, and I find something strange as I look around. *I don't see any other merpeople. There are fish and other animals all around us, but no people. Wait.* I see something sticking out from behind a particularly large strand of seaweed. *Isn't that a merperson's tail? I wonder...* I look around at all the other strands of seaweed, and see tails sticking out from behind most of them.

Now I get it—I'm being avoided.

“Over there's the underground shrine,” my captor says.

“Oooh, my mother would love that.”

We've arrived at a place where we can no longer see the palace and come across a lonely, ash-gray shrine. It's—unsurprisingly—huge. It's also built in a style much different from the shrines back in Doran, which gives it a different sort of ambiance.

“Am I allowed to go in there?”

“There's no rule against it. Go in, if you want.”

“Alright then, I'll just go take a peek inside, if you don't mind,” I say, starting to swim over to the entrance.

Kick kick kick. Swish swish swish.

I don't have a tail like the merpeople do, so obviously I'm slow in the water. *I've also certainly never been underwater for this long, and for that matter, I don't recall swimming that much at all. This might even be only my second or third time doing so.* I flail around in the water, slowly but surely making forward progress. *Swimming's kinda fun!*

I'm not a quick swimmer, though. I bet all the merpeople are scoffing at me from behind their seaweed strands: “Look at that laggard!” They must find it irritating to watch.

Apparently unable to bear how slow I'm going (even though I'm *definitely* not this slow on land), the fishperson, or I guess I should say "Prince Maiteiah," grabs my hand and pulls me towards the shrine. His hand is covered in scales, firm, hard, but also a bit slimy.

He's not grabbing me like he did when he dragged me from my room. No, this feels much different. Kind, even.

"Are you going to take me there?" I mumble, a bit taken aback.

"Yeah."

Why's he being so helpful all of a sudden? Suspicious...

I don't try to struggle out of his grip. After stopping a moment right in front of the entrance, where he rolls his eyes around from side to side surveying the scene, he lets go of me before swimming inside the dim structure of the shrine. Naturally, I follow in after him, but there aren't any lights about, so I have to squint in order to see. Prince Maiteiah must have noticed my squinting, because he suddenly murmurs to himself, "*Let there be light.*" Instantly, all around us shines light from the sun, drifting down through the water above us to fill the inside of the shrine with a bluish-white light.

So this is merpeople magic.

While I'm looking around, impressed by the sudden appearance of the light, the Prince himself is moving farther inside the shrine.

"What is this place?"

"Just what it looks like, a shrine."

There are two stone altars rising high above us along the far wall. *We're underwater, though, so a little height isn't going to prevent me from getting a closer look.* As I swim up to them, however, I'm distracted by what I see on the wall behind them: writing, everywhere. But it's not a type of writing I've seen before, so I understand none of it. Set into the center of the wall is what appears to be a large, glass marble.

"That sphere used to shine with bright white light, but ever since a certain day, it's been nothing but an ordinary glass marble."

“When did that happen?”

“Happened on the day my older sister disappeared.”

Prince Maiteiah gently touches the marble with his hands.

“My older sister would often spend all day in here. She was crying every time I saw her in here, too.”

“And why was that?”

“No idea.”

“Couldn’t you have just asked her why?”

“Who do you think you are?” The fish prince puts his hands on his hips as he turns around to me in a huff. “A real man is supposed to just leave a woman alone when she’s acting like that, right?”

“Well I can certainly see why your older sister ran away.” Not as if I’d ever say that out loud. He’s a prince, after all. I look away from him, back to the wall. I suppose it really doesn’t matter whether you’re on land or underwater—relationships between men and women are complicated. Or at least that’s how I understand his words, amateur in romance that I am.

“Were these characters created by people from the Sea Kingdom?”

“Who knows? They’re from a long, long time ago. Got no idea about them.”

This fish has “no idea” about quite a lot, doesn’t he?

“My older sister, though, she could read them.”

“She must have been quite diligent in her studies to be able to do so.”

“That’s why she ran away. She wanted to ‘know everything about the world,’ or something stupid like that. She wanted to learn more about the people and culture on the continents.”

“That’s—”

“I *hate* diligent people. Who needs to know all that stuff, anyway?”

Asking him anything else about his older sister seems like a bad idea.

I quietly distance myself from the Prince and try to get a feel for these

mysterious characters written on the wall—literally. I place my hands against the ridges and furrows of the engraved characters, trying to commit them to memory. *They haven't got even the slightest bit of moss on them. Clean and sharp as the day they were engraved, most likely.*

In our world (up above), ancient characters are more like pictures than letters; basically hieroglyphics. These characters, however, are all soft, loose rounded curves. It's a bit difficult to describe them in words, but they're certainly like nothing I've ever seen before.

Having seen enough, I exit the shrine.

"What kind of person is your mom?" the Prince asks me once I'm outside, his voice sounding unusually flat.

"Excuse me?"

Just when I thought I'd finally gotten away from him... Prince Maiteiah had followed me right out of the shrine. His big eyes, which look ready to leap out of their sockets, frighten me.

"You. Be my mate. Become the Princess of the Sea."

"Huh? No, um, I'm just a human, you know."

"There are a number of methods by which we might breed."

"'Breed'?! Who says I want to jump straight to 'breeding' with you?!"

The idea of becoming his mate is far too problematic for me to take remotely seriously. *He's completely got the wrong person! Has he lost his mind by asking me to breed with him?!*

"No," I say firmly, just to make sure I got the point across—but that's when he clamps his fingers around my wrist and yanks me closer to his face. *Whoa there, buddy. I'm not the type to just let you get on my nerves like that. As if a slimy git like you could hold onto me...!*

I writhe my arm about, twisting it here, there—and then I get enough momentum to finally jerk it free. *All thanks to my daily workouts, no doubt. I've got enough strength and endurance to fend off any man! If I didn't, I'd never make it as an employee at Harré or ever have a prayer of beating that other*

bastard!

Don't try to get in the way of my dreams, fishboy.

"All I want is to be a receptionist lady! It's been my dream ever since I was a little kid and I'm not about to try being a princess or anything ridiculous like thaaaaAAAH!!"

Prince Maiteiah totally disregards every stubborn little thing I say, and this time he clamps on to both my arms.

"Owowowow! Hey, why aren't you using any magic?!"

"I told you, didn't I? We can't use any magic that would harm another."

"Not that! I'm talking about spells to make yourself stronger, or something—couldn't you capture me real easy if you used magic like that?"

"I would be a fool to use magic like that when I am already prepared to claim you as my mate."

"But here you are, forcing a lady to be your mate against her will—I think I'd have to call *that* foolish as well."

Huh? Who just said that? ...It couldn't have been—

Something *zooms* through the water at lightspeed, in between the Prince and me. Instead of sound, my face is bombarded by a shower of bubbles. Prince Maiteiah and I look at each other, both incredulous at this sudden interruption. Slowly, we both turn to look down in the direction of the projectile—and there, lodged deep into the sea floor, is a long, sharp spear.

"Huh. You dodged. Figures."

Floating up and to my right, his arms crossed, is none other than *Rockmann*. His silky blond hair is waving in the water, and his glowing crimson eyes are stabbing daggers at the two of us.

I'm not dreaming or hallucinating right now, am I? When did he get there? It seems like he's able to breathe...but how come I didn't sense him there earlier?

Swimming behind him is a *gigantic*, mysterious creature. Unlike the monster that had dragged me off the beach, this one has the shape of a normal fish.

What in the world is that? Also, did Rockmann really just imply that he was aiming to spear Prince Maiteiah just now? I haven't felt safe since I came down here to the Sea Kingdom, but that spear almost killed me! What a bastard! It's irritating to think that, once again, he's rescuing me—but can you actually call that “rescuing”? Tossing around a spear, apparently indifferent to the fact that his weapon nearly stabbed right through me? Is he a total psycho?

“Hey! What were you planning on doing if that spear had hit me?!”

“Nothing. It would've been your fault for getting in the way.”

She says, he says.

Rockmann's a perfectionist, though, so I can't imagine he was intending to be so reckless. He's a flawless marksman, but look what we have here—that spear was way off target. Maybe because we're underwater, and he can't use magic, he's actually gotten a little...worse, weaker, as a fighter? I'm not sure if that's good or bad in this situation... I breathe out a little sigh of relief.

It would have been awful to see this fishperson speared right before my eyes.

“Arrogant Human! Do not get in my way. What do you mean by bringing the Great Fish Hownyok before me?”

“*Prince Maiteiah.*” That's the enormous fish speaking, thinking, singing? I'm not sure how to describe it. “*Hownyok has come with this man. We are here to return that girl back to land. The Sea King knows and approves of our intentions, or he would not have let me enter the Land of the Sea.*”

“Shut up!”

The monstrously large fish called “Hownyok” spins its great eyeballs around to stare at Rockmann. “You're the one who needs to shut up,” he says. “I haven't got all day. How 'bout you turn the runt over to me? Then we can both get on our way.”

“Don't call me a freaking *runt*!”

“You need to shut up too,” Rockmann says, swimming smoothly to come right beside me.

That's weird. I've never heard anything about him being good at swimming—

have I lost out to him at that as well?

“Stand back, Human. I’m claiming this girl as my mate. Should you attempt to interfere, you must have a good reason for doing so—do you?”

“Well, she’s my little sister. If I don’t take her back home, our parents will be sad.”

“In that case, you have no authority to intervene here. You’re just her older brother—get lost.”

“What if I said she was my wife? Would you give up then?”

Rockmann lightly places an arm around my shoulder and pulls me close to him. *What kind of crazy talk is this? Why’s he gotta claim me as his wife?*

Ugh, hold on—he did just what he said, didn’t he? He came for me, as promised—but why? Grrr! This. Is. So. Frustrating!!

“If you’re gonna hesitate just because I’m saying she’s my wife, you might as well give up on making her your mate. You know she’s not the princess you’ve been looking for, anyway, so why not back off? I haven’t come here to harm you, after all.”

“Haven’t come here to harm him”? Didn’t you almost stab him through with a spear just moments ago?

“Who’re you calling ‘little sister’? ‘Wife’? If you’re gonna make something up, the *least* you could do is call me your ‘big sister’!”

Not only is he flat-out lying, he’s making me out to be his inferior! I’m not about to let him treat me like that, even if it’s just a fictional relationship! I do have standards, you know.

...On second thought, it’d still be creepy to have him call me his “big sister.” I can’t stand lying—but I know that lying’s the only thing that’s gonna get us out of this situation, and that while lying may be bad, telling a lie may be necessary to protect yourself, sometimes. So, it’s not like, so bad, right? I’m not too fussy about lying, am I? Whoa there, Nanalie, don’t get the wrong idea about yourself—you don’t have to berate yourself over telling a little fib now, do you?

Rockmann can obviously see how flustered I’m getting. He shakes his head,

then says, “Stupidly stubborn to the very last, even when it comes to things like this. You really are an idiot, aren’t you?”

“Hey! Who asked you?! Why’re you here, anyway? How’d you get here?”

I fling Rockmann’s hand away from my shoulder and put some distance between us. *I’m going to ignore the fact that he just called me an idiot.*

The giant fish behind Rockmann opens its mouth wide, and out tumble my three friends, swimming over to me in a flurry the moment they see me.

Nikeh reaches me first. “Nanalie! Are you okay?!”

“Yergh! You got this gnarly *slime* all over you,” says Satanás, cringing away from me.

Benjamin sighs and pats my back. “She can breathe, though, so I’m sure she’s fine, right?”

“I ain’t seein’ a single one of those hot mermaids around! Where’d they all go?!”

“Naru, you’re the *absolute worst*.”

“Nanalie, I’m so glad thaaa—AH!”

My friends—they’ve all come to rescue me. I spread my arms wide and gather them up into a group hug. *Not many people have friends who’d come searching for them down at the bottom of the ocean.* When I first saw them come out of the fish’s mouth, I was worried about the dangers they may have faced in coming here, but now that they’re all in my arms, safe and sound, *together*—all I feel is happiness.

Behind them, I see Prince Zenon and Ms. Weldy have come out of the fish’s mouth as well. I race over to Ms. Weldy to try hugging her too, but she firmly refuses. “The only one who gets to hug me is Captain Alois!” She does allow me to shake her hand, though.

I really ought to thank her for tagging along with them. “Ms. Weldy, I—”

“What a load of *fishshit*! I found her, she’s *my* mate! I don’t care if she’s just a replacement for my older sister, no matter what, I will take this girl to be my—” Prince Maiteiah doesn’t seem like he’s going to give up on me that easily.

Benjamin watches as he throws his tantrum and gives me a look, saying, quite seriously, “You know, Nanalie, you’re kind of a weirdo—but you got all these guys falling head over heels for you. It’s impressive, honestly.”

I’m not sure if I want to entertain her opinion of me as a “weirdo,” but I can’t let this go. “He doesn’t like me, actually,” I say, “he’s just mistaken me for someone else. Apparently, the princess he’s looking for looks like me.”

“Ugh,” Benjamin mutters. “Men only care about *looks*, don’t they?” She scoffs at the Prince, leering at him as if he is some particularly pathetic creature.

“I can’t lose her again,” he says, panicking. “If you try to take her from me—I’ll use magic.”

Prince Maiteiah begins to recite a mer-spell, flapping his thick lips. *Is he going to try to use attack magic on us? If so, we won’t stand a chance against him. None of us can use magic down here, not even Prince Zenon or Rockmann.*

His fellow fish, Hownyok, appears to realize what’s about to happen, and starts swimming towards him.

But the very next instant—

“AH! What the hell’s going on! My magic—Father!”

All of us are bathed in white light.

Before I know it, I’m back inside Palace Oceanus, floating in front of the Sea King’s throne. I look up to see him sitting up there, just as he’d been doing a few hours ago.

“You’re a fool, Maiteiah.”

“Father, why! All I wanted—”

“Young Humans,” rumbles the King, “I ask you to forgive my son. He’s just a very lonely fish.”

All of my friends and I, along with Hownyok and Prince Maiteiah, are back inside the palace. *This is only a guess, but I think the Sea King just teleported us all here.*

Benjamin and Ms. Weldy both drop their jaws in surprise as they look

around. *I can't say I don't understand that reaction.* The Sea King calls out to the Great Fish Hownyok floating behind us, saying calmly, "You are to take them all back to the Continent."

Prince Maiteiah, on the other hand, is forced to remain silent by seaweed trapping every part of his body, including his big fat mouth.

"Nanalie," Nikeh whispers, hiding behind me. "Is that...?"

"The Sea King," I say, nodding.

She peeks out from behind my back to look up at him, eyes wide. "He's so big!"

Well of course she's shocked, just like I was. Not only is he huge, he's half-fish, half-human. Meeting him is like seeing a human giant.

Satanás is distracted by the sight of all the pretty merladies floating in the court.

"Hurry up and get in Hownyok's mouth," Prince Zenon commands him, then he urges Nikeh and me to do the same. "Let's go!"

I turn away from the Sea King—but I can't help but think, *All this trouble was caused by that fish monster Nanyok and Prince Maiteiah. The Sea King has been kind to me, allowed me to do what I want, and got me out of that slimy situation with the Prince trying to mate with me. Surely he deserves a proper goodbye.*

I face the Sea King once more and give him a quick bow of thanks. Right as I'm about to jump inside Hownyok's mouth, however, he speaks to me again.

"By the way, human girl," he says to me. "Would you mind calling me 'grandfather'?"

I stop moving and glance back to answer him. "Your Majesty...?" *Why does he want me to do something like that?* I'm in a rush to be gone, so I just do as he asks without thinking further.

"G-G-Goodbye, Grandfather! Farewell! Thank you very much for helping me!"

"Grandfather?" Rockmann echoes me. He pauses for a moment outside Hownyok's mouth, thinking. Then, he places one hand against his chest and

bows deeply to the Sea King.

The Sea King laughs, and Rockmann rises to face me again.

“Give me your hand,” Rockmann says.

“Why?”

“Not that one—the other.”

He takes my left hand and slips the ring off my finger.

“Why’d you give that to me, anyway?”

“The ring? So I could know where you are, basically.”

“Really now... So you can use a Dorseim Wisdom like that as well, can you?”

“Huh. So you knew what this was all along?”

Can you really use these rings as locator beacons? It doesn’t seem like he knew whether or not it’d work underwater, though.

“Anyway,” he says, “I put that on you, just in case it might come in handy.”

Rockmann doesn’t know everything either, I suppose.

“You probably don’t know this,” I say, puffing out my chest in self-satisfied superiority, “but you *can* use Dorseim Wisdoms in the Land of the Sea.”

“...I kinda figured that out the moment I found you,” he says.

Oh, right. My sense of superiority bubbles right out of me in a disappointed sigh.

“Let’s just get going, shall we? Into the fish mouth now.”

I do as he instructs, sitting down in the fish’s mouth, *behind* the line of teeth. The inside of the big fish’s mouth doesn’t stink at all.

Once Hownyok closes its mouth, it of course gets dark inside, but Satanás is carrying a glowing orb in the palm of his hand, so I can see everyone else’s faces.

I also see the state he’s in. “Satanás,” I gasp, “*what happened to your clothes?!*”

“Oh, this? It was *super* gnarly.”

His clothes are ripped and torn all over the place. From what he tells me, they were all attacked by *another* gigantic creature on the way here. They’d all apparently been forced out of Hownyok’s mouth by the attack, and almost munched on by the attacking carnivore—but, mysteriously, Satanás was the only one the creature had attacked, leading to his clothes looking even more tattered than usual.

“Hey,” Rockmann says, turning to me, “that charm box didn’t work, did it?”

“Huh?”

“You opened the box, didn’t you?”

He’s sitting cross-legged, resting his chin on one hand. Hownyok’s mouth is full of seawater. Slowly, however, the water level inside is dropping, dropping, gone. My hair lies limp against my face and neck, dripping down my shoulders.

“I never opened that box,” I say.

“Hm?” Rockmann furrows his brow, looking like he can’t believe his ears. *Does he have bad hearing, or something? Guess I’ll keep telling him until he gets it.*

“Why would I open it? Our competition isn’t over yet. Even if it’s just a little charm box, I’m not about to let you off the hook that easily.” The image of that little green box, sitting on the ledge next to my window, comes to mind.

Right after we got our boxes, I do believe I got a little sharp with him. “I’m opening this box as soon as I get back to the dorm!” ...Didn’t he bait me into saying that, though?

Still, it makes sense that he would think I opened it after I’d so openly insisted I would. I’d certainly intended to open it when I said that...but while I may never, ever want to see him around town or anything like that, I feel...differently about the idea of never seeing him for the rest of my life.

If we really are never to meet again, I want to make sure I beat him at something—anything—before I think about opening that box.

“You really *are* a silly idiot, aren’t you?”

Rockmann lifts his chin off his hands and covers his mouth with one hand as he laughs. *He's not making fun of me, I don't think—he actually thinks I'm just being silly. Probably.*

After the whole affair of all seven of us piling inside a fish's mouth, being carried across the sea, and putting up with being next to Rockmann for a good while, Hownyok spits us out onto a part of the beach somewhat removed from where I was dragged into the sea by the giant beast Nanyok. There's a rocky outcropping that shields this part of the beach from the rest, and it's completely empty of other people.

"Ouch!"

Hownyok isn't exactly gentle in the manner she throws us up and out of her mouth (someone had informed me that she was a *girl* fish), right into the rock-ridden sand. We all came out of her mouth at once, so some of us have landed on top of others. Rockmann falls on top of me, and one of his knees *crunches* right into my ribs so hard, I feel as though I'm about to die.

Even if I had been wearing proper clothes to shield that part of my body, it would have hurt—but this swimsuit gives me no protection at all in that area! He hadn't meant to bruise my rib cage, of course, so I don't get *too* mad about it—but even so, I can't help but think that whatever this bastard does, he's always got some hidden motive for doing it, even when it looks like an "accident." *Especially then, perhaps.* For good measure, I ball up my right hand into a fist and give *his* rib cage a good pummeling as well. *Excellent. Now we're even.*

I untangle myself from him and stand up and look around for Hownyok—but she is nowhere to be seen. *Gone, without a word. Did she go back home to the Sea Kingdom, or is she hiding nearby?*

Rockmann's standing on the rocks, hands on his hips, as he looks out at the sea. "You know you've got a good woman when she goes home that way, nice and quiet like."

Ms. Weldy doesn't like hearing this. Not one bit. "DOES YOUR LOVE OF ALL WOMEN EXTEND TO FEMALE FISH AS WELL?!" She's pressing both of her hands against her cheeks like some famous painting, screaming at him. "You need to

be more selective in your affections!”

Rockmann’s wearing a loose-collared, long-sleeved white jacket. It’s a commoner garment, but it suits him perfectly. As if to show off his long legs covered in black pants, he’s standing with one leg on the sand, another on a tall rock in front of him, leaning forward. *Just looking at him pisses me off. Not that I’d be able to explain why.*

Ms. Weldy, who’s standing to my left, continues to scold Rockmann. “I like you, Captain, but still, fish? Really?” I half listen to her as I watch the water. The back-and-forth sound of the waves breaking against the rocks is beautiful to hear.

The others had told me on the way back how the King of Seleina had lent them Hownyok. *I wish I’d had the chance to tell her thank you. The King was so gracious to let us, foreigners, use her to get home.* I, a commoner, can’t very well go and thank the King directly. *I thought I might have been able to thank Hownyok, at least, but I guess it wasn’t meant to be.*

After we walk over to the sandy part of the beach, Rockmann points up at the island floating in the sky, saying, “What’re you all going to do now? The three of us will be heading back up to Castle Seleina.”

The sky is bathed in the crimson glow of the sunset. *Just a few moments ago, the sky was as blue as the water below it—but this new color creates a change of the scenery that’s actually quite lovely to look at.* Some of my beloved bunny-birds are flying in the air above us. There are also some people walking along the beach right now, most of them couples, hand in hand. *If Zozo was here, she’d no doubt be rolling her eyes at all these lovers being so publicly affectionate with each other.*

It’s just starting to sink in that I’ve *finally* made it back from the Sea Kingdom. *Glad to be back on land.* I’d been interrogated quite thoroughly by the others about what I’d gone through in the Land of the Sea. It’d all been rather anticlimactic, to be honest—sure, I’d *almost* been hurt by Prince Maiteiah, but nothing else had happened. *Just a little sightseeing, really.*

I don’t think I’ll be able to forget how that fish prince had loved his older sister, and how he said I “looked like her”... Hold on, did he say how I looked like her?

Did he say that at all? Or was it rather that I resembled her in some other way...?

If I truly did “look” like her, then asking a few questions of my parents and other relatives would likely solve the matter of whether I was, in fact, related to a mermaid princess. *Could a mermaid really become a human, though? Sounds like that’s not possible, from what I know.* I shake my head to rid myself of such thoughts. *Whatever. All’s well that ends well, right?*

I’m no longer upset about the whole kidnapping thing, despite how traumatic it’d been; Nikeh had surprised me with just how *furious* she’d been about it, and somehow seeing her get that angry about it had made me, for whatever reason, calm down. *It’s times like these when I realize what good friends I have.*

Satanás answers Rockmann’s question about our plans. “We got Nanalie back on land, right? We gotta see the sights a bit at least before we go home.”

“Sure you got time for that? It’s been two whole days since we stepped inside Hownyok’s mouth for the first time.”

“Huh?!”

“Just in case, I had Weldy here carry this—” Ms. Weldy pulls out an hourglass from one of her pockets. She holds it up so all of us can gather around to get a closer look. Inside the small, wood-framed hourglass, sand fills part of the top and bottom halves. If I look closely I can see that the sand in the upper half has fallen below the second line on the glass.

I and the other three vacationers who went on this trip are slack-jawed at the sight.

It took one day to get to the Land of the Sea, one day to return, for a total of two days since I was kidnapped. It hadn’t felt like that much time had passed while I was down there, but I suppose I’d been passed out for a full day before waking up.

“Everyone,” I sob, “I’m so sorry!” I fall down onto my hands and knees on the sand. “We came all this way, and the vacation we worked *so hard to plan* is now...” The cool breeze off the sea chills my bare skin. My wet hair is hanging together in a long, tangled clump. The light green traditional Seleinian garments

I'm wearing feel cold. Despite the low price I bought it for, the soft, smooth fabric still clings tight, despite all the adventures I've put it through over the past two days.

We all complained about how hot we were upon arriving in Seleina. That seems like so long ago, now... It makes me feel nostalgic for that time, before I was attacked and dragged into the sea...

Benjamin kneels down to pat my back. "Nanale, don't worry about all that! What happened, happened. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but we all got to experience something really unique, right? Plus, we even got to visit the Land of the Sea! I think we've had plenty enough fun."

Her red hair looks resplendent in the light of the setting sun, making it look the same shade as the dusky skies above.

Nikeh nods. "That was the Sea King we saw, right? He was *huge*!"

Satanás scoffs at that, saying, "He was *nothing* compared to those hot merladies, yeah?"

I sniff and wipe away my tears. *It's nice of them to say all that, but—*"We still haven't done our souvenir shopping for the people back home, though..."

"Oh, yeah," Benjamin says, wincing a bit at the thought. Nikeh and Satanás both seem like they'd forgotten the very same thing.

"Ms. Hel, a word, please."

"What is it, Ms. Weldy?"

Ms. Weldy, who's also wearing traditional Seleinian garments, grabs my arm and pulls me away from my three friends, her big, flashy bangles jangling with every step. Once we're out of earshot of everyone else, she stops. The evening wind blows through her light brown hair, revealing glimpses of her small ears.

"Did you see anything down in the Land of the Sea that could have been a demon?"

"No, I saw nothing of the sort. Does this have to do with your investigation?"

"Well, yes, it is a part of it, I suppose. It's fine if you didn't see anything. Sorry for being weird about it."

Ms. Weldy brushes a loose strand of hair behind her ear and looks out at the sea.

If I'm remembering this right, the whole reason for their investigation was to find where that demon had gone. Since Benjamine had also been inside Hownyok's mouth on the way back, I hadn't been able to ask them for any more details about their investigation, but it was definitely the Land of the Sea they had been trying to get into—until they'd run into the fact that they were unable to use magic there.

Without the kindness of King Seleina and Hownyok, they'd never have been able to visit the Land of the Sea.

"Also, this is just something King Seleina told the Captain and His Highness, but be sure not to tell others about our little trip to the Land of the Sea, alright? I told Brunel and the others not to talk either."

"Understood," I say, nodding. *No good would come of blabbering on about that to everyone in Doran. I wonder, though—was that really the first time Rockmann and the Knights had been in the Land of the Sea? I'm not going to voice that question out loud.* From what I gather from Ms. Weldy's expression, it doesn't look like they had much success in entering the Sea Kingdom on their own. *Shame. They probably would have found out quite a lot had they been able to get in.*

"For such a skinny girl, your belly does stick out quite a bit."

"Owowowowouch!"

When did he get there?! At some point Rockmann had crept up behind me, and is now twisting the skin around my stomach. He's not just twisting—he's gonna rip my skin off! And he's tugging right below where he kneed me in the ribs earlier!

Next to me, Ms. Weldy watches this, and her first reaction is to look down at her own stomach, hiding it with both hands, as if ashamed of something.

"Weldy, you're different, not like this one. You're so pretty, I want you to dress like that all the time."

Ms. Weldy's blushing all over at those words from Rockmann. "Goodness,

Captain, really, whatever are we going to do with you?” She looks cute, getting all flustered like that, twisting and turning at the unexpected compliment.

Wait, did he just call me skinny? It’s not like I’m proud of it or anything, but I work pretty hard not to get all soft, you know? I exercise every day back at the dorms. “You freaking—”

“Nanalie, what happened to your shoes—or should I say, uh, ‘footwear’?”

“Oh, those! I think I left them over by the rocks.”

Nikeh’s pointing down at my feet. They’re completely bare. I’d felt my cloth sandals tugging against my feet every time a wave washed over them, so I’d taken them off for a moment—and it’s only here, back on the main part of the beach, that I realize that I’ve forgotten them back in that rocky area.

How stupid could I be? I should’ve realized I’d left them there from the feel of the sand against my feet.

“Later, girls. Take care of yourselves on the way home.”

“We will.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

While I was looking down at my feet, Rockmann had gone over to Nikeh and Benjamine. He’s giving the two of them nice, pretty cloaks to wear on the way home. *Where’d he get those from? Pulled them out of thin air, maybe?*

Ms. Weldy seems jealous of the attention he’s showing other women. She marches over to the three of them, saying, “Now don’t you two start getting the wrong idea about what’s happening here!”

Satanás walks up next to me, smiling bashfully and scratching the back of his neck. “That bastard’s always spoiling the girls, isn’t he?”

“You’re over here, asking me that like it’s the most natural thing for you to do—may I remind you that I am *not* a man? I am, in fact, one of those ‘girls’?”

“Oh, sorry. Just kinda slipped out, ’cuz, you know.”

I know? I know what, exactly?

Satanás has his arms folded, watching the three other women fawn over,

giggle, and be upset by Rockmann's antics. His clothes are still in complete tatters. *Good grief, he hasn't fixed them yet?* He's got a few, ah, *revealing* holes in his pants, so I cast a repair spell to seal them up, nice and clean.

All signs of wear and tear are gone in an instant. "Whoa, thanks!" he says, grinning.

I roll my eyes. *It's not like you couldn't have done that yourself, dude. Does he not know when he should use magic? Or did he purposely leave those holes there?*

"It's kinda weird, though, don't you think?"

"What is?"

"A cool guy like Rockmann's being all nice to her and everything, but Benjamine likes *me*, yeah? What's up with that?"

"Who knows? Benjamine's one of the Seven Wondrous Mysteries of the world for liking you, in my opinion."

Another one of those Mysteries is why she sleeps with such a damn hard pillow.

"You ever ask her why she likes you?"

Satanás practically jumps out of his skin as someone else joins our conversation.

"Ahh! The hell you doing, Noir? Creeping up on me like that..."

It's Prince Zenon. He's wearing the same low-collared, loose-fitting white shirt that Rockmann is, and it looks just as good on him. His legs are completely covered by his sturdy black pants, and he's standing casually behind Satanás.

"It's, just, whatever, man," Satanás says, still on edge from the Prince's sudden appearance. "I wonder though, you know? Like, if we were to get married, what life would, uh... Just forget I said anything, 'kay?"

"Did you just hear *that* word? I certainly did," I say to Prince Zenon, covering my mouth with both hands, speaking in a stage whisper.

"I heard it too, for sure." He's got one hand over his mouth as well. His eyes

are flashing with laughter as he watches Satanás begin to have a mini-meltdown as he realizes what he's just said. "He's finally able to admit it to himself," the Prince says with a wry smile.

The two of them really are good friends, aren't they?

"I-I-I like older women with massive breasts! That's my thing! My first crush was on a neighborhood girl who had *huge* boobs!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. You know, my father once told me that when you really love someone, you say things like that, without even realizing it."

"She's right—the wet nurse who took care of me a long time ago said the same thing, Satanás."

"Ah! You two, stahhhp!!"

Satanás keeps going on and on about how he likes this or that kind of woman, but frankly I don't give a damn about his taste in women, so I just nod my head every so often, ignoring literally all of it. "Uh huh." "Oh, sure." "Definitely." Time, however, is running out. "If we don't hurry up and get to the shops," I say, "it'll be completely dark before we're able to buy our souvenirs." I stride over to Nikeh and Benjamine to get their attention. We agree to head into town right away.

The seven of us all gather together one more time. "Guess we'll be on our way, then," Rockmann says.

"Ms. Weldy, Prince Zenon," I say to both of them as they turn to leave, "thank you so much for coming to rescue me." I turn to walk towards the town with my three friends, and Rockmann begins walking with the other two back towards the castle—but I can't bring myself to take more than a few steps before stopping. *I can't leave that unsaid. It's too important.* I whirl around shout at Rockmann from the top of my lungs:

"You just remember to be ready next time we meet! I *will* beat you!"

He stops and glances back at me over his shoulder. I hadn't said his name, but apparently he'd known the words were meant for him.

"Remember? Remember what? I don't think I'll ever be able to forget all that

flab around your stomach.”

“Ahhh! You are the *absolute worst*, you know!” *I can’t just let that go!*

I stick my thumb in my mouth, bite down on it, and puff my cheeks out in frustration. He laughs once more.

Benjamin’s overheard some of our conversation. “If Nanalie’s belly is flabby, according to Rockmann,” she says, “then what in the world does he think about mine...?” She fidgets with her clothing as she looks down at herself.

“Don’t listen to them go at it!” Nikeh says, sighing. “It never stops, does it? Tit for tat, tit for tat, on and on...” She appears to be trying to get Satanás to agree with this, but he’s too busy pinching Benjamin’s belly to pay attention to anything she’s saying. Benjamin’s face goes beet-red. *She’s pissed. Of course she would be. The hell is Satanás doing to her?*

Rockmann calls out to me as I begin walking away from him again. “You done?”

Panicking, I say something so bizarre that not even I know what I mean: “I’m only going to say this once, so be sure to cover your freaking ears!”

“Don’t you mean he should ‘*clear*’ his ears?” says Nikeh, poking fun at me—but I’m not going to take back anything I say, not now, not ever, not even one word, so I take a deep breath and yell, with as blunt and flat a tone I can manage:

“THANK YOU!”

Whew. I hurriedly turn my back to him, having said my piece.

Nikeh’s eyes go wide. “Weeell now, isn’t this unusual? Minding your manners for once, are we?”

“From my point of view,” says Benjamin, “this is a big step for you, Nanalie! Nice work.”

“I dunno what you’re talking about,” I pout, blowing raspberries at them.

I’m an adult now, aren’t I? I have to at least say “please” and “thank you” when it’s socially required of me, right? I may have unintentionally gone further into this guy’s debt—two times this trip he did me favors—but he better watch

out. I'll clear that debt, AND beat him at something.

I don't know when I'll see him again—six months, a year, or two years from now—but I swear I will break those damnably long legs of his and sneer down at him as he squirms about on the ground.

Oh, hey, I just realized something about what I was thinking about, back at the Museum of Culture: the only person I can't bear to "look down on me," to condescend to me, is Rockmann.

I'm not sure I particularly like how he's "special" to me in that way.

"Nanalie, do you *really* hate Rockmann?" Benjamine asks as we're walking.

"Hate him'? Hmm, it's more like I can't *stand* him. He, though—he definitely hates me, right? I don't even know if he thinks of me as *human*, come to think of it."

"Has he ever *said* that he hates you?"

"Well, yeah, of co..."

"What's the matter?"

"Of cou— Hm?"

I'm looking up at the sky, racking my brains. Benjamine edges her face a bit closer to mine as if she's hanging on my every word.

Has he ever said that to me? Has he ever graced me with that magnificently unpleasant phrase, "I hate you?"

"Now that you mention it," I say, "I can't recall if he has or not. But, I'm sure, at least—"

My memory must be failing me, just this one time. If he really hasn't ever said that to me...what have we been arguing, fighting, competing over, all this time?

"I hate you."

I panic—just a little—at my inability to find those words anywhere in my memories.

Life as a Receptionist Lady, Year Two, Part Two

There's been a problem with the monster bugs, lately: they've gotten a lot more numerous. Sorcerers have even been asked to help take care of them. Monster bugs have whitish, translucent bodies and are elliptical in shape. Though they are practically see-through, you can't actually see their heart or any of their other organisms, so in that way they're more like ghosts than regular animals.

They're about as big as an adult man's shoe, and, in my opinion, fairly nasty.

Monster bugs tend to breed right around the time of year when most of the demons are out and about, at the beginning of the Season of Light. We get huge numbers of sightings around then.

Getting rid of them is unexpectedly difficult. If you touch them with your bare skin, you'll develop an awful rash, so most of the time you have to enchant the plants around them to capture them, or if you've got good aim you can use levitation magic to yank them right out of whatever attic or grassy field they're hiding in. Then, of course, you've got to burn them right up with an enflaming incantation, to get rid of them—but monster bugs, as it turns out, have queens, just like bees, and unless you get rid of *them* too, they'll just go on multiplying.

They're not the type of animals that will directly harm people, but if too many of them breed in one area, they'll sap the living energy of the entire place. People sometimes even pass out or get seriously ill if there are too many living nearby. The link between monster bugs and illness in humans isn't clear, but the fact that it *exists* is enough to classify the bugs as pests. Any adult could take on one or two of them, but when presented with a *horde* of them—well, the only real option is to hire a sorcerer to take out the queen.

"The Kingdom's the one fronting the money for these bug jobs, yeah?"

A plump sorcerer with a shaggy beard is standing in front of my reception desk, patting his belly as he looks down at the request form. He takes the center of the three request forms arrayed across my desk and reads the details

written on it closely.

The man's got a massive sword strapped to his back. A lot of swordsmen—and swordswomen, for that matter—enchant their swords with magic before they fight, just how I have the Cudgel of the Goddess, my *Dare Labdos*, absorb magic circles.

"Yes," I say, "the Kingdom can't afford to send any Knights out on monster bug exterminations, so they've been asking sorcerers to take on more of the work recently."

"Oho! That's good to hear. More work for me! Guess I've got my job, then. I'll head right out and take care of these buggers."

The man signs the request form and, big belly jiggling all the while, struts right out the front doors of the Guild.

It's not just the requests for exorcisms that have been increasing lately, I think, but the number of requests backed by money straight from the King's treasury has gone up as well.

The sorcerers seem happy to have the extra work, and the commoners are just glad to have someone helping them out with some of their problems (on the Kingdom's pegalo, at that). *It's strange, though. The number of requests for exorcisms has been steadily ticking up, hasn't it? Isn't that a bit odd? It certainly appears unusual, given how concerned the Director has been about those requests lately.*

It's not like none of the other receptionists, let alone the Knight's Order or the other upper echelons of the Kingdom, haven't noticed this phenomenon.

"So, how many monster bug requests have you assigned since this all started?"

"That was my fifteenth right there."

Behind me, the Director's doing some paperwork, unusually enough. *She must've heard our conversation.* Typically she's back in her private office, but it's refreshing to have her out here on the floor with the rest of us.

"Well I guess that's it for now, then."

“Just three for today, Director?”

Ms. Harris waves over at us to get our attention. “I gave out two today, so that makes five total between us,” she tells us.

Then someone else walks up to me. “Oh, hi, Ms. Hel! I made up a new Ice spell recently.”

“Is it the one you were telling me about the other day?”

“Yes. Please, let me show you—it’ll only take a second.”

A beautiful woman with glossy long hair has come over to my desk, smiling. “Here goes nothing!” she says, all excited. Facing me, she points her two index fingers—and wispy, cobweb-like threads slither out from her fingertips.

“What is that?” I ask.

“Ice threads,” she says, spinning her fingers in the air. The threads follow the motion of her hands, falling in clean, smooth curves on top of my desk.

“They’re pretty strong, so I might even be able to make some clothes out of them,” she adds, winking at me playfully.

“That’s amazing!”

“You’re making up a new spell too, aren’t you, Ms. Hel? Please show it to me sometime.” She leans in, perhaps a little *too* eager with her request.

“I’ll let you know once it’s ready for me to show it off,” I say, giving her a thumbs up.

“Oooh, I’m looking forward to it! Oh, right—this is the incantation for Ice threads. Try it out.”

“Thank you so much.”

“I’m just glad to have someone to talk about all this with! Alright, I’ll see you later! Off to work.”

“Take care.”

Vivia Harve is twenty-five years old. She bounces out the door, skipping, wearing her favorite red boots. She’s an Ice Witch. Every time she comes up with a new Ice spell, she shows it off to me.

Ms. Harve hadn't known my magic type until very recently. She spotted me using Ice magic once while I was out in the field, and after that, came up to my reception desk one day, saying "So we're two of a kind, aren't we?" And it had all started from there.

We receptionists know which sorcerers are which type, but we never go out of our way to say things like, "Oh, you're that type? Me too!" It's unprofessional. It's okay to talk about if the sorcerers are the ones to bring it up, but we aren't supposed to start that conversation.

There are a few other Ice mages working at Harré, all female receptionists more senior than myself. One works in the east branch, the other in the west branch, and we've chatted with each other in the dorm before. Because Ice magic has, compared to other types, fewer known incantations, we Ice-types are often telling each other about new spells we've made up recently. Both of the other Ice-type receptionists have shown me their own spells, so conversations like the one I just had with Vivia are completely normal. To mages of other magic types, the conversations must be weird to overhear—but I rather like them. I'm quite proud of the little sisterhood we Ice mages have, and the fact that we're always trying to find new uses for our unique style of magic.

"I'm HERE!"

"Hello."

The sorcerers are coming in one after the other today. This next "sorcerer" is the little boy named Beck. He's a bit taller than I remember him being. Now he can just barely peek over the edge of my reception desk.

"Sorry about him, Ms. Hel. My son's always too loud."

"Oh, not at all! He's full of energy today, isn't he?"

Beck's father, Mr. Makkahre, pats Beck's head with one big hand that nearly covers him entirely, grimacing at my reply.

Little Beck here must take after his father. When they smile, the lines on their faces match perfectly. The father has eyes that are a little more relaxed, wider than Beck's narrow gaze, but when either of them burst out laughing, their eyes

both look like little crescent moons. *Like father, like son.*

Beck's hair shakes a little bit with effort as he stretches out his hand to reach for something on my desk. *Is he trying to grab one of the request forms?* He may have grown a bit taller, but he still doesn't have enough of a reach to actually take anything off my desk.

After they leave, some time passes, and I have lunch. Following that, I head into the guild library, ready to re-order and re-label all of the books and materials with all the right sorting numbers.

"Oh, hi, Miss Hel! The ones on that shelf are for you."

"Thanks, Cheena." Cheena has also volunteered to help organize the guild library. "The Director said that it's a huge pain to have to take the books off the shelves and put them back every time. She wants us to figure something out."

"Couldn't we just send them flying back to their spots using a levitation spell?"

"Well, we could. I don't think we could just summon them every time we feel like it, and I don't think the Director expects us to figure that out. But she did tell me that, ideally, the books would just go back to the shelves, all on their own, once the borrower's done reading them."

It's a complex task to be sure, but the Director asked me to do this herself. I've got to show her I can pull this off.

Once Cheena and I finish re-labeling all the books, we brainstorm how to solve the Director's problem.

We try taking out a book and having it "memorize" its shelf, and its spot on that shelf, using magic. But if we use that kind of spell, we also have to enchant the *time* it should return to the shelf—if we don't, the moment we let it go it'll just fly right back to the shelves.

"What about if we made the magic so that it wouldn't try to fly back to the shelf while the book was open?" Cheena suggests.

"That's a good idea. But, as soon as the reader closes it, it'll just fly away, then... We could use stone weights to prevent them from doing so, though—

wanna try that?”

“Sure. Let’s have everyone try out that system, and then we can put it to a vote, once people have decided how they feel about it.”

“Sweet. In that case, we don’t need to change the order of the books at all, but we do have to do this: write out the titles of each book on the lending list, and then next to each title, write every employee’s name. That way, when someone’s borrowing a specific book, their name will appear next to the title.”

We’ve enchanted the lending list with a search spell, so if we use that to determine who’s borrowing which book when, we’ll be able to figure out right away who has borrowed a given book should it ever get lost. Plus, with the lending sheet, we’ll also be able to tell if the book we want is available to be borrowed or not.

“I’ve got the names of every Harré employee right here.” Cheena pats the big directory books next to her.

“Thanks. What’d the Director say when you asked for those?”

“She said our idea sounds interesting, and that we should try whatever we come up with. She also said that everyone would be surprised if their books all suddenly started floating away from them, though, so we need to write an explanation in big, bold letters across the top of the list. Oh, and, ah, Miss Hel?”

“Yes?”

“Does this all need to be written by hand?”

“Yep.”

Oooh, I can already feel my little finger bones breaking at the prospect of having to handwrite everyone’s names on these lists. The magic won’t work unless we write the names by hand, however, so we don’t have a choice. It’s the same with magic circles—with magic, the beginning of the work is always the hardest, and the most important. Once we finish writing all this out, we’ll do the spellwork, easy-peasy, but first... I look at the mountain of guild employee directory books and feel as though I’m about to faint.

The fact is, however, even situations like this, puzzles like this—they get me

excited.

I take out my favorite pen and, dividing up the work with Cheena, begin scribbling away the names, one character at a time.

* * * *

“We’re going to participate in the Wall Helenus.”

“I beg your pardon?”

All of the Harré employees are blinking rapidly in surprise at the Director’s sudden announcement.

We’re in the middle of our monthly status update meeting. Other employees have shared what kind of requests have been frequent recently, how many new sorcerers have come into Harré looking for work this month, how many have retired, which areas of our buildings might need repairs, what new items are on the guild canteen’s menu, and the like. All of it is stuff we need to know to do our jobs.

The meeting’s taking place in the room next to the guild library. Normally, this room isn’t very big—it’s actually a bit smaller than my dorm room—but we’ve used a spatial expansion spell to increase the interior size of the room so we can all fit inside.

Seated around the large round table in the center of the room are the Director, Mr. Alkes, Ms. Harris, other employees who work the night shift or the canteen, and myself. There’s about twenty of us here in all.

“The Wall Helenus?” Ms. Harris asks.

Zozo, sitting next to me, whispers in my ear. “Sounds like she’s pretty committed to the idea.”

The Wall Helenus is a magical competition where six mages, one from each type—Fire, Water, Earth, Lightning, Wind, and Ice—come together to form a team, battling other teams. It’s like the adult version of what we did as students back in my fifth year, what with the Practical Combat Competitions and all.

Mr. Alkes raises his hand. “Are we doing this to gain publicity for the Guild?”

“Yes, we are. If we become the champions of that tournament, there’s no

doubt that we'll be known far and wide. People will be tripping over themselves to start working here!"

"Sounds straightforward."

The Director had gone around asking for ideas as to how to increase the number of applicants we got for positions here at Harré, but I'd certainly *never* thought she'd settle on doing something like *this*.

The Wall Helenus is a massive competitive tournament that takes place once every five years. Every Kingdom on the continent takes turns hosting it. There's a big monetary prize for the winning team, and there are many participants who come from outside the host country to compete.

The question of *where* in Doran to hold the tournament was settled long ago: since it's impossible for each kingdom to secure enough land for a permanent area to host all the competing teams, the facilities for the event are always constructed in midair, next to the Royal Isle. Some of the host countries apparently have their royal castles on the ground, but all of them generally conjure an entire arena to float in the air above the kingdom for the duration of the event, or so an old sorcerer told me once.

The creation of the arena requires gathering together all the builders and architects skilled in construction magic from around the kingdom, led by the Third Platoon from the Order of Knights.

Which country is the host for a particular year's competition is already decided *before* the previous competition, which means that four years ago, it was decided that Doran would be the host country for next year's tournament.

"I'd like for you all to consider this matter as, basically, *decided*, okay?"

Even if we don't directly participate in the tournament, however, Harré's already a pretty famous institution in Doran. I guess the problem the Director's trying to solve here is that we lack that "special something" that makes people want to apply for a job here. If we don't show the world how fascinating our work is, nobody's going to show any interest in becoming a Harré employee.

The Director told me once that it was quite rare to have cases like mine, where as a little child, I saw a young woman working at Harré and determined

then and there that I would grow up to be a receptionist like her.

That reminds me—I never did tell the Director that she herself had been the young woman who so inspired me.

“At this rate, we may last another year, or two, but eventually we’ll hit our breaking point.”

“But Director Locktiss,” Mr. Molro says, “surely there’s no need for us to go as far as fighting in the tournament?”

The Director waves away his question. “We’ve been putting off too much for too long, which is why we have the problem that we do. If we don’t nip this in the bud before it becomes a bigger issue, next year we won’t have a single new employee here. On top of that, we’ll have retirees, I’m sure, which means the guild will just get smaller and smaller from here on out. I can’t stand the thought of that.”

“It’s a massive tournament that lasts five days, though. Are you suggesting that we dispatch some of our employees to such an extended event?”

“If anyone dislikes my idea, please, tell us of another idea. Harré doesn’t have too much work to do around that time of year anyway, right?”

Old Mister Molro is the oldest employee here at Harré, and it seems like he’s run out of reasons to protest the guild’s participation in the tournament. Unbecomingly for his age, he puffs out his cheeks in frustration and glowers at her in silence.

Not a single other person at the table suggests a different plan to gain publicity. They’re all just sitting there, mulling over whether the Director’s idea is a good one or not.

“We’ll be deciding at a later date who, exactly, are going to be our six participants. That’s all for now.”

And with those words from the Director, the meeting is adjourned.

I take the large stack of papers I used to take notes of what we discussed in the meeting and carry them next door to the guild library. Zozo comes along with me. There are a few other employees in the room. Some of them are

working, and others appear to have come in on a day off to simply enjoy the room as the nice library it is.

I often come here for light reading or studying on my days off. *This is actually where I spend most of my time, outside of working at my reception desk or sleeping in my dorm room.* Don't get the wrong idea, though—I'm not some layabout who's got nothing better to do besides reading books.

"Let's sit over there," I say to Zozo.

She nods. "Sure." Once I lay my papers on the table and we sit down, Zozo starts complaining. "Today was my day off, though! Why'd I have to spend it at a *meeting*? Ugh. Anyhow, the Wall Helenus—it's held during the first month of the Season of Light, right?"

"Yes, that's correct. I think the dates were written on the papers the Director gave us."

I look down at the papers arrayed across the desk before me. Today's actually a day off for me as well, so I'm not wearing my uniform, only my usual dress. I've rolled the loose hems of my sleeves up to my elbows so they don't get in the way of my work. Carefully, I try pulling out one sheet of paper from the middle of the stack—but there's simply too many papers, and I end up pulling out several more I don't need. *Hey! You stay there.*

On the paper I'm holding I can see the dates and the detailed schedule for next year's Wall Helenus, along with the conditions for participation and notes about the prize money. I put the paper down between the two of us so we can both read it together.

"The last time this was held was four years ago, so Nanalie, you were still a student in magic school, huh."

"Zozo, you had just graduated yourself that year, hadn't you?"

"Yeah, and I had just started working at Harré. It's a five-day event, though, so I was able to use one of my days off to go to the Kingdom of Vestanu, pay the entrance fee, and watch the fighting. Must say the ticket was a bit expensive, but I had fun."

"Part of the ticket proceeds go towards funding the prize money, right? So

that's a good use of your money."

"How pragmatic of you. Still, we don't actually know if new people will apply to be Harré employees after seeing us in the competition. I'll be happy if we do get some new blood in here, but we can't be sure."

"I suppose everyone must think all we do is paperwork."

"Well, we *are* actually doing paperwork right in front of all our clients and sorcerers, so it's not too surprising that they'd think that."

I recall all those times I've walked into work and seen Mr. Alkes and the others just silently working away, shuffling papers here and there.

I've got to admit, she does have a point. Paperwork is all the public ever sees us doing, after all.

"Oh, by the way," Zozo says, "I noticed the one you got me is a different color from Cheena's." She points to the seashell bangle on her wrist, tilting her head to one side in confusion.

"I thought it might be good for you not to match," I reply.

The bangle she has on her wrists is one of the souvenirs I bought while I was on vacation in Seleina. I got one for all the people I work with in my duties as a receptionist. Zozo's has a green shell on it. The bangles may have just been little souvenirs from my vacation, but I'd spent a good deal of time choosing the colors to match who I'd be giving them to. The patterns were all the same, but the colors were different. Cheena's is a yellow-green, a little different from Zozo's green.

"Speaking of shells," she says, "people who live in countries from across the sea participate in this competition as well. The champions will be respected around the globe, just like the heroes who saved the world, all those years ago."

"Four years ago, the team from Vestanu won, right? I remember seeing their pictures on the front page of the newspaper."

"Yeah," Zozo sighs, looking out the window. "Vestanu's *really* good."

There are countries that have Knights, and others that don't. Usually, though,

if a country has an Order of Knights, and they're serving as the host for that year's tournament, the host country's Knights form a team and join the competition. It's a tradition.

The Knights of Vestanu had participated in the competition that Vestanu hosted four years ago, and they'd been crowned the champions. But they hadn't only won that year—they'd also been the champions of the previous tournament.

Vestanu specializes in magical education. All of their subjects are required to learn advanced spellwork, and their educational and legal system is set up so that not a single child grows up without learning how to cast spells. *Every* one of their schools is like Doran's Royal School of Magic, and students spend a great deal of time learning about the fundamental workings of magic, unlike in most other countries.

"Borizurie was amazing last time," Zozo says, dreamily.

Borizurie, as it turns out, happens to be one of the "Top One Hundred Sublime Mages of the Modern Age."

Zozo continues, "Doran's the host this time, so that means our Knight's Order will definitely compete, don't you think?"

"If they follow tradition, then yeah, I think so! Exciting, right? I really like watching those types of fights."

Zozo tilts her head to one side and looks at me dubiously. "Wait..."

"What's the matter?"

"Don't *you* want to compete, Nanalie? After all, if the Knight's Order is joining the competition, then that son of Duke Rockmann might be joining their team."

"Oh, actually, I'm not really—"

Around the time I entered my second year of working at Harré, Zozo seemed to have come to understand that I view *him* as my bitter foe. Now, apparently with that in mind, she's looking at me with a sincerely puzzled expression on her face, like "Why doesn't she want to fight him with an opportunity like *this*?"

I'm not going to say that the prospect of a huge battle tournament *isn't*

throwing my fighting instincts into overdrive, especially if there's a chance he'll be a participant. *It's the ideal time and place to beat him at something: public and fiercely competitive. I doubt I'll ever have another opportunity this good to give him such a thorough whooping that he won't be able to stand up afterwards.*

As a mere second year employee at Harré, however, I really can't just come out and demand that the Director give me a spot on the guild's team, given how important this event is to her and the rest of the employees.

That's not the only reason I'm hesitant about facing Rockmann in that arena.

"Perhaps it would be a different story if there were solo battles," I say, "but I'm not sure I'd like to do team fights. Even if he participates, it's not like I'm guaranteed to be able to do the same anyway."

There aren't many other Ice-types here at Harré, but it's not like I'm the only one. They're all really quite amazing, too—if one of us is going to join the competition, it's obviously going to be one of the more senior receptionists.

"If you say so," Zozo says, suspicious.

"Besides," I say, "rather than beating him in magical ability... Let's just say I'm aspiring to achieve more in my work as a receptionist than he does as a Knight. He goes low, I go high, you know, that sort of thing."

Not that I'd turn down the chance to give him a good beating were it offered to me, of course. My overriding goal in life, however, isn't to defeat him. I don't dream about it. Defeating him is something I will simply have to do in life, like climbing a mountain bold enough to get in my way, or passing through a valley impudent enough to place itself in my path.

I pause, thinking about the words that have just gone through my head. *I'm not sure I myself understand my feelings very well. Basically, I guess that while I've no desire to fight him right now, I do feel like there's no bounds as to how competitive I am when it comes to that guy.*

"Like a horse that flies across the sky," Zozo whispers, looking out the window.

The sweet aroma of pastries fills the cafe. All around us are young women all dressed up, with flowers in their hair and perfectly applied makeup. Resting their arms against the round white tables, groups of girlfriends are enjoying chatting with each other, being cute. They're as happy as children in the way that their eyes sparkle when they lift the baked sweets on their plates up to their mouths, smiling and patting their cheeks with every delicious bite.

I'm holding a cute porcelain teacup, decorated with flower patterns. I lift it up to take a sip, watching my two friends sitting across the table, arguing again.

"Ugh! This is crazy! Naru hasn't been spending any time at all with me lately!"

"Benjamin, come on now, calm down. Even Satanás must want to be alone sometimes, right? Hasn't he always been like that, personality-wise? He has, don't you think, Nanalie?"

The sun's beams are falling from high in the sky this afternoon.

Benjamin's got her handkerchief in her mouth, biting down on it in red-faced frustration. Her red hair is defying gravity, flaring straight up towards the ceiling. *She looks beyond mad. Is she about to start crying...?* Seeing her bite down on her handkerchief reminds me of how all the noble girls used to do the same thing, back when we were in school. *Does every woman in love want to bite down on loose pieces of cloth, or what?*

Nikeh begins gently massaging Benjamin's back in an attempt to calm her down while begging me silently. *"Please,"* her eyes seem to say, *"help me out here."*

Today, the three of us are out having a lovely, elegant tea time in a fancy cafe.

Ah. Adulthood at last. I'm feeling mature today; we're not playing around with magic, but calmly—modestly, even—enjoying a cup of tea and some sweets. I have good taste in leisure activities, if I do say so myself. I'm not very knowledgeable about different varieties of tea, or the names of the fashionable pastries, but I don't really mind being ignorant of that, really.

Compared to my school days, when people whispered behind my back that I was like a wild animal (according to Nikeh), I'm not like that at all anymore. I'm a perfectly civilized adult woman. I think.

“Satanás, hmmm...”

Back to the matter at hand. Benjamine is lamenting how Satanás has been putting some distance between the two of them recently—but as Nikeh says, Satanás, as far as I can recall, has never been the clingy type. He’s the type of guy who, if you take your eyes off him for *one second*, he’s disappeared, gone off somewhere else entirely. During our days at magic school, he’d often snuck out of the classroom right under the teacher’s nose. *Not exactly the type who can stand sitting still for long.*

I mentally flip through my memories of Satanás. Yes, I nod my head to Nikeh. *She’s right.*

“But, but—I know that! I know what he’s like! That’s not what I’m talking about!”

“Then what *are* you talking about?”

“He’s going off to work with some other woman I don’t know! And recently, it hasn’t just been some of the time, but *all* of the time! I invite him out to come work with me, but he says he’s ‘got something else to do’ and turns me down!”

Well, I certainly don’t know how this all came about, but the situation seems more serious than Nikeh and I had originally thought. Even I can understand why Benjamine is this upset right now. But hold on, setting that aside, isn’t there that other question to be asked? They—

“You aren’t, technically speaking, *dating*, are you? You and Satanás?”

“W-W-Well, no...”

Benjamine casts her gaze downward and frowns. *So is that the real problem here? The fact that they aren’t actually boyfriend-girlfriend yet? If they were actually together, I’d be able to get all up in Satanás’s face and say something like, “The hell you doing, two-timing your girlfriend like that?” But, of course, if they aren’t actually dating, it’d be completely absurd for me to do something like that...*

Benjamine seems to understand that too, though, remaining silently discontented, unable to voice why, exactly, this is all so worrying for her.

We could always use magic to force him to confess what he's doing behind her back, but I have a feeling that would just make the whole situation worse. They'd never be able to trust each other afterwards, so I'm not about to recommend we do that.

Not like there's much trust in the relationship between them right now anyway.

"How did you find out he was going out to work with this woman?"

"Right in front of Club Dolmott, there's a bar owned by Cambell's family."

"By Cambell's family?"

"Cambell" had been a friend of ours back during our magic school days.

"Cambell herself happens to be living back at home right now, helping out with the family bar. She told me that Satanás and this other woman walked in one day, talking about work."

"Did Cambell speak to them?"

Benjamin waves her hand in front of her face. "No, no she didn't. She thought what they were doing was, like, *suspicious*, so she got into a disguise before she approached them so they wouldn't know it was her."

"Women really are *quite something* at times like that," I say, eyes wide.

"Yeah," Nikeh says, hanging on Benjamin's every word.

No normal person would be suspicious of two people walking into a bar together...right?

Nikeh and I huddle up and whisper to each other about this story of Cambell's spontaneous decision to disguise herself.

"Huh?" Nikeh says, surprised at what I've just suggested. "But—wait, hold on —"

Before Benjamin can say anything further, I thrust out both my hands in her direction, palms up: *This ends now, Benjamin.*

I've remembered why the three of us are here today. I'm here, obviously, to enjoy some tea with my friends, but the real point of our gathering is something

else entirely: a certain bar owned by a certain friend of Benjamine's needs some extra help this weekend, so Benjamine's asked us to help her friend out and work the bar, just for one night.

As a casual bar, all we'll really be asked to do is collect the orders and bills from the customers and carry food out to their tables. It's not some fancy luxury place with a special style of service, so I'm not nervous about the idea of working there. Plus, it's a bar, and as someone who can, ah, *hold her liquor*, I agreed to it without a second thought. Since I'm getting paid for labor outside of my receptionist job, I had to let the Director know as well, and she's okay with the idea. Nikeh had told the Knight Commander about the job without exactly mentioning the name of the bar, and seemed to have gotten permission as well, but she didn't tell any of her other Knights about the work.

Well, of course she wouldn't. While there're probably also going to be female customers in the bar, part of the job is going to be having conversations with the male customers, entertaining them. For some people, they'll think we're "indecent" women for working in a place like that, doing that type of work. I'm not going to mention working there to any of my other friends, let alone anyone from Harré.

Interesting how providence has worked this all out for us, though. Couldn't we use this opportunity to...

I place both my hands on the table. "The bar where your friend needs our help—it wouldn't happen to be *Cambell's* bar, would it?"

Benjamine winks at me and sticks out her tongue, giggling. "Hehe! *Cambell's* it is, friends."

So that's where this has all been leading. I laugh to myself, shaking my head at the convoluted way Benjamine had made her request. *Basically, she wants us to go work at Cambell's bar to spy on Satanás. It's a reconnaissance mission.*

Cambell herself was going to be working too, so Benjamine wouldn't be all alone if we decided not to accompany her—but she seems visibly relieved that we're willing to help out.

"Excellent," she says, beaming. "Think you could use psychometry to figure out what Satanás was talking about with that woman?"

“Um...well... I don’t know about that.”

I’d really rather not use magic unless I have to.

Nikeh seems to understand how I’m feeling. “We don’t know that they’ll be there tonight anyway, right? The psychometry spell won’t work if they don’t come.”

Benamine shakes her head. “Nah, they’ll *definitely* come.”

“Goodness,” Nikeh sighs, “how can you be so sure?” She takes a sip of her tea, looking worried.

She seems quite certain—does she know Satanás’s plans for tonight, or something?

“After all,” Benamine says, “tonight’s the weekly Guy’s Night Out. Discount for men only. Cambell told me he always comes then.”

I tilt my head to one side and wonder aloud. “As a man, wouldn’t he be irritated if people thought of him as a cheapskate...?” Pathetic, to be sure, but it’s very like Satanás to be so miserly. Even so, I can’t imagine that any woman he invited to come along with him to a bar on a “men’s night” would be overcome with feelings of love or affection for him. This mystery woman has to hate him for being such a parsimonious prat, right?

I tell Benamine what I’m thinking, but she says, “That’s not the problem here.”

“*What*, then,” I ask, a little exasperated, “is the problem here?”

“The problem,” she says most matter-of-factly, “is not that I don’t know anything about this woman. The problem is that he’s having intimate rendezvous with other women in a bar across the street from a place like Club Dolmott. I worry so much about what he’s doing there that I can’t sleep at night.”

Benamine’s really grown up. She’s mature enough to like a stingy guy like Satanás who only goes to bars on their men’s discount nights. I’d never be a match for a guy like that. I lean over a bit in my seat to meet her uncharacteristically downcast gaze.

“If you just went ahead and confronted him, telling him face to face how you feel about all this... But I suppose if you were able to do that, you wouldn’t be asking us for help, would you?”

“Nanalieeeeeeee,” she says, pleading.

I lean back and nod to myself. “Very well! It shall be done!” I say, slapping my knees with gusto, then clenching my fists with determination.

Nikeh watches me go through all this. “Stop, Nanalie.” She rolls her eyes. “You’re acting like an old man again.”

I choose to ignore her. “We shall accompany you on this mission until we know the truth of the matter! Let’s get going to Cambell’s bar!”

“Thanks, Nanalie! Wait—what’s wrong, Nikeh?”

“Oh, nothing really. I just...”

Ever since about halfway through our conversation, Nikeh hasn’t seemed very excited about what we’re planning to do tonight. She’s refusing to meet our gazes now.

“You don’t have to force yourself to come along if you don’t want to,” Benjamine says.

“It’s not that.” Nikeh shakes her head, making her blonde hair flutter a bit. She goes on mumbling to herself, one hand over her mouth. “I’m just worried that since the male Knights usually go to Club Dolmott, some of them might see me working at the bar across the street.” She’s completely disregarding our stares.

After a moment, though, she seems to have pushed through her uncertainties, and raises her eyes to meet ours, smiling widely. “I’ll help you too!” And so with a nice, energetic pat on Benjamine’s back, she stands up, ready to head off to work.

* * * *

The reason Cambell’s family owned a bar was *not* because her father liked liquor, but because her *mother* absolutely loved to drink and taste all different types of alcohol.

I've got a general idea of where the bar is, but I've never been over to visit Cambell's house before, so I'm not completely sure. While we were in school together, her parents had apparently warned her never to bring any friends over. *Makes total sense, really. Kids shouldn't be playing in a bar, after all.*

As an adult, I have, of course, been to the livelier parts of town where lots of sexily dressed ladies work the nighttime establishments...but the area in which Cambell's family bar is located takes the "sexy" aspect of nightlife to another level entirely: in that neighborhood, there are a lot of "inns" where a man and a woman can spend the night together—*all* night. *It takes a lot of courage for a woman to walk into a place like that.*

Club Dolmott, which Benjamine had mentioned in our conversation, is one of those "hospitality" establishments, and a high-class one at that. I've heard a lot of aristocrats frequent the place.

My father had, actually, joked to my mother once that he wanted to go there, "just to try it out." She'd been furious, somehow beyond rage in her reply: "They'd never let you in," she'd said, cold as ice. I'd gotten a sense as to what kind of business Club Dolmott was just from the tone in which she said that. Even now I shiver a little bit at the memory.

As I'm remembering all that, we've arrived in front of the bar in question, across the street from Club Dolmott. There's a sign over Cambell's bar: "Derahle's Pinky," it says, with the image of a human pinky embossed on the wood.

This neighborhood, which is also referred to as the "red-light district," is full of people after dusk. On the way, the streets had been quiet, mostly empty now that the sun had set and the day's business was done. *Here, though, it's like the town's just waking up. There's a pulse, quick and lively as the music I hear leaking out of windows and doorways.* Mixed in with the music are the sounds of chattering crowds and the tinkling of glasses, both getting louder the closer we get to our destination. As we walk down the streets, I feel the distant, interested stares of patrons who've not yet had enough to drink to distract them from the sight of us, a group of just three women, unaccompanied by any man.

Nikeh, Benjamine, and I, paying not the slightest attention to these stares, head into Cambell's family bar. The saloon-style doors are accompanied by cute potted flowers on both sides. As we walk in, the wooden doors swing shut behind us, announcing our arrival with a small *creak*.

For a part of town that's known to have a lot of roughnecks and outlaws, this bar's got a surprisingly clean ambiance. It's nice.

Club Dolmott, in contrast, has a "nice" light pink color: the doors are pink, the window frames are pink, and I'm sure at least some of the inside is pink. *Like a little castle*. You'd never be able to find even a single fleck of dirt on its walls, but its overpoweringly *dirty* aura that's perceptible from even the street makes it hardly seem like the cleanest place one could visit, metaphorically speaking.

Usually in a bar, though, the paint on the walls is a little faded, with some wear and tear on the furniture—but I don't see any of that here.

Compared to the dimness of the dusk outside, the inside of the bar is filled with a warm, comforting light.

I take a step forward on the wooden floor, and notice something odd—my boots, which have some mud on them from the walk here, leave not the slightest footprint on the floor, as if *the floor itself* is refusing to get dirty. Over in the corner, I can see a broom sweeping up dust, all on its lonesome. The windows along the wall are also being showered with water every so often, preventing any dust from building up.

"Your family must like keeping things clean," I say to the hostess, impressed. The hostess, a young blonde woman who leads us further into the bar, is none other than Cambell herself. *Really—no, incredibly clean in here, isn't it?*

My parents happened to be neat-freaks themselves, but certainly not to this degree. *Our floors aren't enchanted to repel dirt, that's for sure.*

"Well yeah, of course we dooo! My father's actually a bit famous for just how *obsessed* he is about cleaning... Anyway, when it comes time for customers to pay the bill, just have them pay at their tables."

So it's her dad that likes keeping things clean. I nod my head deeply. *For a man to be like that is so...so...moving. Inspiring. Impressive.* Cambell just laughs

at my reaction, her two large front teeth peeking out of her mouth. She's wearing an apron lined with frilly lace, looking every bit the gracious hostess.

"Mom's the one who makes the food, so after you've written down the orders, just send them flying thataway," she says, pointing in the direction of the kitchens.

"Understood," I say. I've listened carefully to every word of her explanation of our duties. Then, just a moment after we've reunited with an old friend from school—

It's go time. The bar is opening for business in just minutes, so she quickly runs through the details of how we should serve the customers, what types of alcohol they serve, and how to calculate the bill. The "open" sign hasn't been hung outside yet, so there are no customers inside as she tells us all this.

I don't have any time to get all excited about seeing her for the first time in a while, or to write down anything that she's telling us, but she says I don't need to be anxious, so I decide not to overthink the whole helping-out-at-the-family-bar thing.

"Anyway, that's all I think you really need to know—was there anything you didn't understand, Nikeh?"

"I think I've got it. Should we just look over there for the menu items?"

"Yeah, just off that board there."

We're all standing in line in front of the bar counter, listening to her explanation of our duties. Nikeh's pushing back her hair from time to time as it falls to cover her face, making her seem a bit gloomy, causing Cambell to want to check on her. Benjamine's using a spell to write notes down on her arm.

From what I remember of our days in school, Cambell tended to be closer to Benjamine. Both of them always tried to dress up pretty fancy, after all. Maybe that's the reason why they were friends.

Cambell'd been obsessed with foreign clothes from a young age, and had taken a particular liking to the Kingdom of Seleina's traditional garments. She liked clothes so much that she worked hard to get a job in fashion. After graduation, she started working at a clothing store, "Barber." It's a chain that's

known throughout the entire continent. Barber's headquarters are in the Kingdom of Iravin, so she moved there from Doran to start her new job.

Not everyone who attends magic school wants to become a sorcerer or a Knight. After all, there were people like Cara Yakkurin, who wanted to become an archaeologist, and Cambell Par, both of whom had wanted to work outside Doran. *There were lots of other students like that.* Some people might wonder why a family would go out of their way to send their child off to magic school for a job like "fashion designer," but in Cambell's case, she applied the spells she'd learned towards designing clothes and accessories, improving the functionality of the products. With her abilities, in just her second year working at Barber she'd already been promoted to head of the textile manufacturing division.

Cambell hadn't liked studying. In fact, she often slept through lessons, or so Nikeh, who'd been a classmate of hers, had told me. Interestingly enough, however, she'd shown a rare flash of enthusiasm and curiosity in a particular lesson about spells that could be applied to clothes and accessories, asking the teacher quite a number of questions.

"Our teacher," Nikeh told me on the way here, "would be in a good mood or a bad mood for the *entire* day based on exactly one thing: whether or not Cambell slept during lessons or not."

I hadn't shared the same classroom as her, Cambell, and Benjamine, but as commoner kids, we sat together at the same table in the cafeteria during lunch, visited each other's room, and had a lot of fun together, all in all. *In fact, I think, remembering those long past days, I don't think that there was a single commoner girl in our year that I wasn't friends with. We all had to band together in that environment.*

"Right then, Benjamine? Cast that transformation spell, would you? It'd be a real pain for Satanás to recognize you with a unique opportunity to watch him like *this*."

"For sure! But the spell will only last thirty minutes, so I'll need to head to the ladies' room once every half hour to recast it. Sorry."

The pep talk before our shift speeds right on by without further details about

our work. Now we're finally talking about the *real* work to be done here: spying on Satanás. We can't have him noticing Benjamine, so she changes her facial features and her voice a bit to disguise herself.

The longest that transformation spell will work on her is thirty minutes, so we'll just have to make do with half-hour increments. Normally, transformation spells only lasted about five minutes. *Thirty minutes should be long enough.*

"Nanalie, Nikeh? We're gonna have you do a special little transformation as well. Okay?"

Benjamine and Cambell spin around to face us, devilish little smiles on their faces. Cambell's got her arms behind her back, and all I see is her polished, prominent front teeth flashing in the lantern light as she smiles at me.

It isn't a smile that makes me feel at ease. It's the mischievous smile of a prankster, someone who's *definitely* planning something.

Nikeh and I give each other a look. She's got sweat beading on her brow. *Nervous?*

"Cambell," Benjamine says, giggling to herself with one hand over her mouth, "you're being *naughty* again, aren't you?"

"Nanalie, what's wrong?" Cambell asks me. "Getting cold feet?"

"I-I-I'm the one who wants to ask *you* what's wrong! You're planning something, *aren't* you? Some embarrassing scheme."

"Heavens above! Me? Scheming? Why, all I want to do is have you all model some of my new designs!" She fluffs out her short, smooth blond hair with a wave. Her light brown eyes are flashing with joy.

"Being naughty." What in the world could Benjamine be referring to? She's a clothing designer, so is she going to make us wear particularly revealing outfits? Are we just dolls to her, sacrificial mannequins to be offered up to the Gods of Fashion?

Cambell *snaps* her fingers, enveloping us all in a white smoke. As it clears, I see something fall from above. Instinctively, I stretch out both hands to catch it, whatever it is: a frillier, skimpier version of the apron Cambell herself is

wearing. I hold it up to take a better look—*this is definitely more revealing than what she has on.*

“Hey, um, Cambell?”

“Whaaa-aaat?”

“You *know* that I’m not as gifted in the chest department as you are.” I hold the garment back out towards Cambell.

“That’s not true at all! You’ve got more than I do, that’s for sure. Anyhow, you’re holding Nikeh’s costume, *this one is yours.*”

Snap. She conjures up another dress, and this one looks like it has a lot more to it. I unfold it to see that the lower half is nice and long—but the upper is rather sparser. The fluffy folds of the fabric around the cleavage look like they’ll cover up the *delicate aspects* of my appearance, but my shoulders will be bare. *This’ll be more embarrassing than that time I wore that dress to the school graduation party, more embarrassing than that ridiculous dress I wore to the masquerade—even worse than those traditional Seleinian garments!*

It covers up more skin than Nikeh’s apron, though, so why does the idea of wearing this seem so disgraceful?

* * * *

“Three deep-fried pokkel fish, coming up!”

I write down the order on my notepad, rip off the top sheet, and send it flying towards Cambell’s mother, Ms. Weira, who’s over behind the bar counter, preparing food.

Glancing up at the wall to look at the menu, I add up the prices for the items. *Wait, was that—?*

I look back up at the wall. There, next to the menu, is an advertisement for the upcoming Wall Helenus. *Been seeing a lot of those lately.* I even saw one at the Vegetarian Wolf the last time I went there with Zozo.

“Carry this out, would ya dear!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

It's lively inside the bar. I hear men laughing here and there at their tables, so loud that I can hardly hear what Ms. Weira's calling out to me. Since today's "guy's night out," when men get a discount, there's obviously a lot of male patrons. *In fact, I don't think I see a single female customer.*

"Check please!"

I take one table's order, carry away another table's dirty dishes, clean them with magic, then head over to another table to collect the bill from a customer.

"*Whew,*" I sigh, fixing up my ponytail and brushing a stray wisp of hair back behind my ear. *Is it hot in here, or is that just me?*

"Oh dear, little Nana! Wait right there, I'll come over and fix your shoulder."

"Th-Thank you very much."

The shoulder strap on my apron is about to slip right off. I stand next to the kitchen counter and thank Ms. Weira as she fixes my clothes so they won't fall down.

How embarrassing!

I'd given in and decided to wear the Cambell-designed apron, but even after having it on for a while, I just can't quite get used to it.

I turn around to face Ms. Weira again. "Well look at you," she says, beaming. "Dark brown hair looks good on you as well, doesn't it?"

"Cambell said it might be good for us to disguise ourselves too. I haven't changed my voice or anything like that though, obviously." *If we hadn't and only Benjamine had disguised herself—well, the whole charade would have been pointless. Satanás would've needed just one look at me and Nikeh to guess that Benjamine was around here somewhere as well.* Nikeh and I have just changed the color of our hair. She's got red hair, now.

Ms. Weira sighs at the mention of "disguises." "Men and women—it's tough, you know? Getting along with a guy, especially like that. I really do hope our little Meda gives it her best, though, despite it all."

By "Meda," she's referring to Benjamine.

One of the men sitting at the bar addresses her. "Yo Weira, what's up with all

the cute gals you got workin' here today? Finally decided to go into *that* kinda business?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I've got my reasons. Nothing you men need to know about. Right, Nana?"

Ms. Weira's got her very curly, blond hair arranged into a tight bun against one side of her head. Just like Cambell, she's got a kind, warm slant to her eyes that makes me feel right at home. Her somewhat plump physique had originally made me think she led a quiet, unhurried life—but she runs a bar in the red-light district, looking after both her customers' and her workers' needs all throughout the night, with a big, bright smile as she chatters about this or that with her clientele.

She must know about the whole drama with Benjamine. Why else would she have that playful smile on her face?

The man she's been talking to at the bar faces me.

"Nana? That your name? Gonna be here tomorrow too?"

"Oh no," Ms. Weira interjects, "these girls are just for tonight. So you drink your fill while she's around to serve you, okay?" She flashes the same big front pearly whites that her daughter's got as she smiles at the man, looking like she's enjoying herself.

"Just for t'nighhhht? Hang 'round a li'l longer, Ms. Nana—"

"Watch it! You want to lose that hand?"

"Owowow!"

Ms. Weira swats away the thick hand of the muscleman who's just reached out to, ah, "grab my hand"...or something.

My eyes widen a bit in surprise. "Ms. Weira," I say, "do you actually do all this yourself? Isn't it tough to handle?"

I'm standing next to her at the kitchen counter, helping her stack clean plates, looking around the inside of the bar. Every single seat is filled. *No normal person would be able to handle all this.*

"Oh, you ain't gotta worry about that! It's not always this packed in here. It's

all thanks to Meda, Hera, and you, Nana dear, that we've got all this business tonight!"

Cambell told me before our shift started that while the bar usually isn't crowded, there are a good number of regulars—enough to keep one person busy, which is how Ms. Weira likes it, apparently. She's not looking for new hires to help her out permanently.

Cambell comes back behind the bar counter, her server tray empty after bringing some customers their orders. "Ah!" she exclaims, looking around the room, "Where's Meda?"

"She's off in the ladies' room again." I reply, then add in a whisper, "her transformation spell was about to wear off."

"Meda" is Benjamine's middle name, and "Hera" is Nikeh's. They're using their middle names as part of their disguise. *It's a bit difficult to remember to call them that when I'm looking right at them, though, I must admit.*

Benjamine's disguise is perfect, by the way. She's using magic to shorten her hair to shoulder length and change its color from red to light pink. With a charm, she's managed to make her voice sound completely different from its usual sing-song tones. Even when I'm talking with her, face to face, I think: *I'd have a hard time knowing this is Benjamine had I not been told about this whole plot to disguise herself. By just changing her voice and her hairstyle, she's almost like a completely different person.*

Oh, that reminds me—back when I snuck into the masquerade with the Duke, I never did change my voice, did I? Bit of a half-hearted disguise, come to think of it. I blush with embarrassment at the memory.

One of the customers raises his hand. "Server girl, we're ready to order—!"

"Be right there!" I go over to jot down his order, then run back behind the bar counter. "Oh, sorry Nikeh," I say as I bump into her along the way.

"No worries..." she says, not meeting my eye, cheeks flushed. *Something's up.* She begins to wobble a bit, at which I grab her arm to support her.

"What's wrong?"

“Hmm? What...?”

“You seem like you’re on edge—you’ve been looking over at the windows all evening.”

Ever since the shift started.

At first I thought she was keeping an eye out for Satanás. While it wouldn’t have been odd for Benjamine to be that watchful, it *had* been odd to see Nikeh getting more and more anxious as the night wore on, fixing the cleavage of her dress as she stole glances out the front windows. *There’s something going on with her, no doubt about it. She is showing a good deal more skin than I am, so maybe that’s the issue? I’d completely understand in that case. But it doesn’t seem like that’s the thing that’s troubling her... She’s distracted, and that worries me.*

“No, I’m really fine,” she says, waving away my concern. “It’s just—” Nikeh’s suddenly stopped talking, frozen with her eyes looking out the window. The very next instant she ducks down behind the counter to hide herself from view. *What in the world...?* I look down to see her crouching with her hands against the back of her neck, as if bracing for an explosion. Her red hair is covering her face, so I can’t tell what her expression’s like.

“Hey server girl, you not feelin’ good?”

“Yo, Newbie Nana! Bring me some more liquor—!”

“Well lookee ’ere boys, Ms. Meda’s back! Gimme a pint, would ya?”

All around us are customers shouting this or that, a man concerned about Nikeh here, a thirsty man in the far corner over there—the night goes on, and we’re getting busier and busier. Benjamine must’ve finished up in the lavatory, because now she’s back working the bar, with all the customers who’ve taken a liking to her calling out her name.

“Nikeh, can you stand?”

“—Yeah, sorry about this, Nanalie. I can stand, but outside—”

As I’m helping her up, I take a quick glance out the window. The windows are, by the way, completely clear, without even a trace of fog clouding them up,

thanks to the careful cleaning charms of Cambell's father. Even now that it's nighttime, I can see the streetlamps along the sides of the road, and all the people walking to and fro between the various establishments.

Directly across the street, of course, is Club Dolmott. There's a group standing in front of the entrance—standing in front of Derahe's entrance as well, in other words. They're all dressed in black.

Why, I have no idea, but the Knights from the Royal Order are standing just outside the front door. I can't tell if Prince Zenon or *that bastard* is in the group.

I squint my eyes and try to get a better look at them. *He's taller than others our age, taller than most of the other Knights in the Order, even. I should be able to make him out from here... Ah, there's someone who fits the bill: he's got the same shape of head, the same body type, and his hair gives off that same aura (what do I mean by 'aura'?). Why're they stopped there on the road?* The group of black uniformed men doesn't look to be headed inside Club Dolmott. *Come on, scram! Get lost in that sultry pink palace, full of sexy ladies!*

One of the Knights, however, starts talking with a customer that's just exited our bar.

Wonder what they could be talking about? The weather? The news?

"They're gonna go into Club Dolmott, right?" Nikeh whispers from her crouch behind the counter.

"Yeah. Probably."

"But you're here," Nikeh whispers, shaking her head, red hair fluttering. "Every time I'm with you, Nanalie, we always seem to run into him."

Huh? The heck's she trying to accuse me of? I don't remember being the cause of him showing up uninvited every time we hang out. I give her some serious side-eye for that comment, but before I can respond I hear the door chime. In walks a large, strong man.

"Hey hey! Weira, I see you're unusually crowded today—heard you got some good women workin' the bar, that true?"

"Oh *my*, well if it isn't the Knight Commander! What a special occasion! Aren't

you the type to always be over at Club Dolmott?”

The man is, unexpectedly enough, the Knight Commander. I perk up my ears as I try to make out snatches of their conversation over the dim roar of the bar crowd.

“I couldn’t help wanting to check out why you’re so busy tonight, yeah?”

“Well, I *will* warn you that all my girls I got working for me here are *not* for sale.”

The Commander shrugs at Ms. Weira’s chiding. “Eh, really? Not very hospitable, that. Oh well.” He turns to yell out at the Knights behind him. “Hey, you lot—tonight, we’re drinking at Derahle!”

“They’re coming in?!” Nikeh’s working herself up into a panic as, contrary to our expectations, the Knights begin coming into the bar, one after the other. I, who’d been calmly watching the whole scene unfold, begin tapping Nikeh’s back in a frenzy to get her to see what’s happening.

“Man,” one Knight says, “I am *beat*.” *They must have just gotten done with their duties.* They’re all stretching and looking around the room as they walk in. Their Knight uniforms, which are made with black cloth and a tight-fitting cut, usually make them look pretty cool when I see them around town, but right now they seem stiff more than anything else.

It’s too late now, but I could’ve just used illusion magic to make all the empty seats look filled. Dammit! I bite down on my lower lip. *Why’d they have to come in here? If they’re regulars over at Dolmott, why not just stick to the routine? Who goes out of their way to try getting into an unusually crowded place, anyway?!*

“And I just got purified...!”

I look straight up at the sparkling clean ceiling. The brown ceiling fans are spinning round and round.

Fed up with how often I’ve been encountering Rockmann, I’d gone over to the temple the other day to have one of the Kindly Women who works there purify my soul.

Temples are normally places to *pray*, not receive spiritual *purifications*, but as long as your request doesn't go against the teachings of the gods, the Kindly Women will usually hear you out. The Kindly Woman who took care of me was tall and beautiful.

"What would you like to be purified of?" she'd asked, and with desperate, bloodshot eyes, I replied:

"Well I can't say who but I'd like to have this curse I think someone's cast on me to be gone because I seem to attract all sorts of fire mages particularly men who are blond and are pouty spoiled gits that I run into all over the place and I simply don't understand how that's like *physically* possible so today I thought I'd—" I didn't even stop to take a breath.

Without a single question, she looked down at me with those warm, Kindly eyes of hers, placed a hand on my head, and chanted the words to purify my soul.

It's customary to pay a small gratuity to the temple at the end of your visit—but I grabbed a third of my monthly salary out of my bag and gave it to the Kindly Woman. "*Oh, no, I couldn't possibly accept this much,*" she said, her calm demeanor gone as she hurried to refuse.

"If I'm not cursed to suffer so many awful things from now on, thanks to your purification," I said, *"then this amount of money is worth that protection."*

I've learned that the world revolves around money, basically. *She may be a servant of the gods, but the temple has to provide for the Kindly Women somehow, and they can't do that without money. The gods have stretched out their hands to save me from my misfortune; this is the least I can do,* I'd thought, thinking pretty highly of myself as I walked away.

"You *actually* went to a *shrine* to purify yourself of *Rockmann*?"

"Hey now! I follow through. I walk the talk. I talk and then I walk."

"You know, sometimes I can't tell if you're being silly...or if you're actually just an idiot."

Huh? Why's she saying that?

“Hey—! Server girl—! Another skewer of meat!”

“Another over here, too!”

“Y-Yes sirs!”

This won't do! I'm on the job and I've got to focus. I shift my attention back to the customers. I write the orders of skewers on the notepad, then send the paper flying over to Ms. Weira in the kitchen.

“Cambell! Show the Knights to their seats, 'kay—!”

“Yes, mom—!”

Cambell rushes up to the front of the counter to greet the Knights and direct them to their seats.

“Yo, girl, you cute!”

“Got any Wajimaru liquor?”

The Knights pour into the bar one after the other. Not a single one of them looks put off by the crowd inside. They all waltz right by the other patrons, acting as though they've been here dozens of times as they order food and drink from Cambell.

Ten...fifteen... Fifteen? Weren't there more people standing outside, though? Around thirty or so, if I saw it right... I look out the window again. There's about fifteen men still standing out there, closer to the entrance to Club Dolmott. A woman comes out from Dolmott to greet them, and one by one they disappear inside. *They must've split up because their group was too big to all go to the same place.*

Far off in the corner of the bar, I see Nikeh holding up a pot lid in the general direction of where the Knights are sitting, as if to protect herself. She's already taken care of the customers who ordered meat skewers.

“Hm? Is he not here?”

I'm sure I saw a blond guy among them, but from what I can see now, Alois Rockmann isn't here.

“Huh. Good,” I say, hesitant to claim the curse is completely gone.

“Gooooood,” Nikeh sighs, having come over to stand next to me.

“Nikeh? What’s ‘good’ for you?”

“Oh, uh...”

Nikeh and I had said the same thing at the same moment. I turn to see her eyes darting away from mine, looking flustered.

“Are you happy Rockmann’s not here too?” *Speaking of which, I didn’t see Prince Zenon here either. Maybe they’re off doing something else together.*

Nikeh had told me that the Prince was busy with his official duties lately, so it seemed doubtful he’d have time to spend a night out on the town. *It’s ridiculous of me to be thinking like this anyway, though. I shouldn’t go around thinking that I can meet the Prince anytime I want to. He’s a royal, after all.*

“A-Anyway, Nanalie, let’s just try acting like we don’t know them when we serve them, okay?”

“Nikeh,” I say, appraising her. “You look better now.”

“I figured it wouldn’t do for us to look all flustered. People would suspect something.”

Nikeh, the only one getting flustered was you, but—I nod my head in agreement. Certainly it’s better to act natural. Wouldn’t want to raise any suspicions. I don’t have any real acquaintances in the Knight’s Order other than Nikeh, Rockmann, and Prince Zenon, anyway, though, so I’ve got nothing to be nervous about. Nikeh, though...

I look over at her once more. *If they don’t get too close to her, they shouldn’t be able to recognize who she is. She could just feign total ignorance if asked, though, and it’d be fine. She’s got permission from the Commander to be working here tonight, after all, so even if they do find out, I’m sure he’ll keep it from becoming some big deal.*

Nikeh and I edge over to sit down next to the wine casks, giving our feet a rest after standing for so long. Cambell, who had guided the Knights to their seats, approached us, looking nervously over at Nikeh. “The Order’s here,” she says. “You sure you’re gonna be alright?” She’s got this apologetic grimace on her

face as she asks this, both hands raised as if begging Nikeh's forgiveness for this turn of events.

Where's Benjamine off to now? I look around, but I don't spot her. *Must be back in the lavatory recasting her transformation spell.*

Satanás isn't here yet.

I think the whole situation is getting to Nikeh. Next to me, I hear her let out a little sigh of exhaustion.

"Nana! Hera! One of you two mind pouring us some drinks over here?" *That's a customer calling for me.* I face the counter, looking for the thirsty man.

"I'm warning you—those girls *aren't* for sale," Ms. Weira says, looking stern.

"Whoa, Weira, I ain't tryin' to pull nothin! Just want some company to go along with the drinks, 's all good, yeah?"

"Sheesh. I suppose there's no helping it—Nana! Over here!" After I finish delivering the earlier customers their meat skewers, I hurry back towards the counter.

"You asked for me? How might I help you?"

As it turns out, this guy wants a "young thing" to pour him his drinks. I stand behind the counter and pour his liquor into his glass. He sits on his bar stool, watching me all the while. His face is beet-red, so I'm a little nervous about serving him *more* to drink. The man—a regular or the guy's friend, I'm not sure which—who's sitting next to him, however, tells me that he always looks like that, so I calm down somewhat and do as I'm asked.

This is customer service.

If I just do this how I do my work as a receptionist, there shouldn't be any problem at all.

—*Dingaling!*

The chime over the entrance rings. "Welcome, come on in!" Ms. Weira calls out.

"These seats around the counter open?"

“Yeah, take your pick!”

“Thanks.”

The customer who’s just come in sits down in a seat on the side of the counter opposite where I’m facing, so I can’t see who it is.

“Whoa there Nana, you’re spilling a bit.”

“Sorry about that. Your clothes weren’t stained, were they?”

I point my fingers at the small spill of liquor on the counter and chant the incantation to clean it up. Some had gotten on his clothes as well, so I spell that clean too.

“You,” he says to the newly arrived customer behind me, “you got a pretty face, you know that? A Knight, right? You sure you don’t want to head on over to Dolmott instead? Commander may be here, but you won’t enjoy a clean little establishment like this, I bet.”

“No,” the man behind me says, “I wanted to drink here tonight *because* it’s clean.”

“Oh, you tired?”

“Yeah, he’s beat,” says another man behind me, “he got into this row about participating in the Wall Helenus or not. Didn’t you, Captain?”

“*Captain.*” My ears perk up at that.

The old man sitting in front of me sloshes his drink a bit in surprise. “Whoa, the Wall? Helenus? I been hearin’ the Order might fight this time—that gonna happen?”

“Yes,” the man says. “Although I’d rather the Wall Helenus not even be held in the first place, all things considered.”

I try turning my head to see who’s talking, but my body refuses to listen to me. My bones are practically *creaking* as they resist my will, fighting as though every instinct within me is screaming to tell me that I *must not turn around*.

That voice. That VOICE. THAT voice. To think that the day has finally arrived when I can pick his voice out in a crowd.

“You against the competition, boy?”

“Indeed I am. Can’t say I’m in favor of it at all.”

I slowly divert my gaze to look at the backside of the counter, where the clean glasses are shelved. Looking there, I can see the reflections of the customers behind me. The very moment I confirm my worst fear, I also feel a very strong desire to be anywhere—*literally anywhere*—other than in this bar right now.

“Why?”

Sitting behind me is a blond man. He must’ve cut his hair again, because, unusually for him, it no longer falls all the way down to his shoulders. Not too different a look, but it’s new, fresh. The top buttons on his Knightly uniform are unbuttoned, exposing a bit of his chest, creating a bit of a casual, unkempt aura about him. Like I’ve seen once before, he’s also got on these silver-rimmed glasses.

And there he sits:

Alois Rockmann.

He’s just sitting there, munching on fried bunny-bird, without a care in the world.

“But the purification...!” I mutter to myself, despairing. *I purified myself! Of the curse that is Rockmann! And yet here he is again, haunting my every step!*

The man sitting across the bar counter misunderstands, thinking I’m trying to hurry him up.

“Payment? Huh? I’m not leavin’ anytime soon...” He waves his hand in front of my eyes, snapping me out of my slump. I give him a quick smile then refocus my attention on the conversation going on behind me. *You’re the one I want to be paying up and leaving me alone, Rockmann!*

“Now now, Captain—it’s already been decided that Doran is going to host the Wall Helenus, so there’s no point in groaning over that. Let’s just have a toast to its success, shall we?”

Next to *him* sits what appears to be a Knight under his command, a flaxen-haired young man who’s been chatting with Ms. Weira all the while. Rockmann

and the Knight tap their glasses in a toast and down their drinks.

Not only did he have to come to this bar tonight, he had to come sit at the counter! Why, Goddess, why? I glare up at his reflection. *Couldn't you have sat with the Knight Commander at the innermost tables? Can't take a hint, can you?*

"Madam Weira, is Derahle always this busy?" That's Rockmann again.

"Well, not always, but I'm certainly glad to have these four darlings helping me out today," she says, nodding towards Benjamine, who's just now coming back behind the bar.

"Yeah, you got some cute gals working here today," says the Knight sitting next to Rockmann, making a rather lewd face as he looks Benjamine up and down. "Those women over at Dolmott's got that high-class reputation, but they sure leave something to be desired...unlike these babes here."

"Hey, Little Miss Nana," the man in front of me says, leering at me, "you got a boyfriend or something?"

"No, I do not."

"Leave something to be desired"! What a rude thing to say about other people. He is, however, a customer at our bar tonight, so I can't tell him off.

I focus on the older man who's sitting in front of me asking all sorts of inappropriate questions. He's not wasted, but his eyes are drooping a bit as he smokes a cigarette. He's munching on a snack as he chats with me, his unsteady hand lifting the food to his mouth.

"Yeah? That right? I ain't got a girlfriend—"

"Sir, here's your water."

"Miss Nana, sure would be nice if *you* were my girlfriend..."

"Hahaha! What a funny joke, sir."

I've learned over the course of several nights spent with various drunken men that the best thing to do when they talk like this is to humor them, taking nothing they say very seriously.

"You've ever had a lover, Miss Nana?"

“No, I have not.”

“Whaaaat?! A pretty girl like you’s never had a man? I can’t believe it...”

“Haha! ‘Pretty girl’! You are quite a jokester, sir.”

Not once in my life has anyone ever confessed their love for me, nor have I ever fallen in love with a man. As a full grown woman, I’m not particularly *embarrassed* about that, but I must admit that when it comes to conversations like this, I’m decidedly lacking in any interesting stories to tell.

Whenever the topic of romance comes up, then, I just listen, laugh it off, and change the subject. I can’t help but smile, though, at this old man going on about “love.” *Really doesn’t matter if you’re a man or a woman—everyone enjoys a good love story, don’t they?* I’m reminded of why I’m working here tonight. *Sure hope Benjamine and Satanás get back together soon.*

The night goes on. Benjamine’s made another trip to the ladies’ room, and is now back serving customers. A while ago, she’d come up and whispered in my ear, asking, “Is Satanás here yet?” to which I’d just shaken my head. I’ve not caught so much as a glimpse of him all night long.

As promised, I’m staying here with her until we get to the bottom of this business of Satanás going out with another woman—but I’d certainly felt like fleeing the room when she’d turned around, noticed Rockmann sitting there, and whirled back to me, all flustered, saying, “ARE YOU ALRIGHT?!”

Good grief, Benjamine. If he had figured out who I am because of your impossibly obvious question...it would have been the Disgrace of the Century.

Just having him see me *in this getup* is disgraceful enough, but as long as he doesn’t realize it’s me, I will, somehow, make it through tonight.

Nikeh seems to be struggling with a similar problem. She’s avoiding the tables where the Knights are sitting, and Benjamine and Cambell are taking care of practically all of them. *Perhaps that’s for the best.* From time to time, however, a Knight flirts with her in passing, commenting on her figure—completely ignorant of the fact that they are hitting on a colleague. *She can’t let her guard down while they’re here.*

On the other hand, I think, blushing at the impropriety of the idea, it would be

funny to see how they reacted if I told them that's Nikeh. Nikeh's a charmingly beautiful woman even in normal clothes, but tonight she's distinctively lovely in that server girl's uniform Cambell made for her. You know, I put one hand on my chin, musing, I don't think she's ever told me about a crush she's had. What's up with that?

I don't have time to ponder further on the subject. The older man who wanted me to "pour his drinks" for him earlier wants more food. I hustle back inside the kitchens, grab his order, and carry it out to the counter. He dives right into another topic as I serve him.

"Hey, Miss Nana...d'you believe in fate?"

"Fate, sir?"

I'm now stuck in this conversation, standing across the counter from him. Next to the wine casks, I see Nikeh and Benjamine casting worried glances in my direction. As I finish pouring his drinks, he takes my hand in his own, holding me there.

"Yeah, fate. Something that's decided before you're born, something you absolutely cannot escape from." He winks at me. "The reason I met you tonight wasn't destiny—it was *fate*."

"Fate, huh?"

Aaaaaand here we go again. Sir, you are drunk. Please go home. Who wants to start talking about "fate" and "destiny" after their fifth beer, anyway?

I stay there, calmly hearing him out as he holds my hand all the while. Ms. Weira isn't going to remain calm about the way he's grabbing me, however—in the midst of her bustling hither and thither between the various dishes she's cooking up, she sees what's happening, comes over and slaps him hard on the forehead, indignant as can be. "For shame, sir! What do you think you're doing, touching one of my girls like that?"

Ah. I wish I could be as strong as her. You've got to be that strong to be the Madam of a bar, I suppose.

"OWWWW!" The man groans, bowing his head low in pain.

That must've really hurt. "Sir, are you—"

"Oh, he's fine," Ms. Weira says, interrupting me before I can finish. "There's someone else who needs your attention." She's got this mischievous look in her eyes, just like Cambell did earlier. *Like mother, like daughter. But what could she be referring to? Did a friend of mine just walk in or something?*

"Nana," she says, nodding towards someone to my left, "take care of them, will you? They said they wanted you to pour their drinks." She pats me on the shoulder and spins me towards them. I tilt my head to one side in confusion as I survey the full counter. She points her chin in a particular direction. "Those handsome young Knights sitting there."

Really. Really?!

"Oh, no, I couldn't, haha, funny joke—"

"No need to fret! How often do you get a chance to do something like this, anyway? I thought I'd help you escape from your 'fated lover' here."

"Help me escape"? Ms. Weira, you have taken me out of the frying pan, only to toss me headlong into the fire. This is a total disaster!

"Come now," she says. Before I can open my mouth in protest, she gently takes my arm and leads me over to where they sit, three seats down from the other man.

I refuse to make eye contact, steadfastly focusing on the fried bunny-bird skewers they've finished eating that are sitting on their plates. Ms. Weira mistakes my downcast gaze for embarrassment. "Oh, how cute! Forgive the shyness, Sir Knights, she's a newbie."

"Sorry," I say, giving her a quick bow of apology. *I am "working," after all. Can't be rude to customers like this. Even if it is him... Plus, if I ran away now, it would be like fleeing from an enemy. Despite how mortifying this whole situation may be, I must stand my ground!*

I take the offensive, busting out a big bright smile and a high-pitched voice to match my disguise. "Um, well... I'll pour your drinks now!" *I do not know this man. I do not know him.*

“She’s definitely a *fine* little lady, don’t you think, Captain?”

I take the glasses Ms. Weira has laid on the table and begin to fill them with wine. The male Knight next to *him* is snacking as he checks me out.

“Captain.” What an unpleasant word. I sure know who that is referring to... If I were to rank every word in the world in order of unpleasantness, I think “Captain” would come in at number two. Number one, is of course—

“Hmm, I’m not so sure.”

“Whaa—? You’re the one who asked for her, Captain...”

By “Captain,” the Knight is referring to none other than the man sitting next to him, Alois Rockmann. I don’t know how much Rockmann’s had to drink, but he looks sober. *His eyes are clear and bright as always, at least.* He’s also wearing glasses tonight, unusually enough.

I’ve seen him wear those before. Does he have bad eyesight, or something? No spell exists that can heal one’s vision, in the same manner that there is no spell that can conjure meat out of thin air. For those with poor vision, eyeglasses are all that can help.

Not that it matters to me whether or not he has bad eyesight. Couldn’t give a fig about it.

Wait. Rockmann asked for me, specifically? I slide my gaze over his face, making sure to not look the slightest bit curious. *It’s not like I wanted him to ask for me—but why did he want me over here?* I feel mildly annoyed at my inability to ask him straight out.

“Whew! ’S hot in here.” The flaxen-haired Knight is, unlike Rockmann, obviously drunk. Or at least that’s the only explanation I can think of when I see how red his face is and how droopy his eyes have gotten.

Suddenly, Rockmann calls out to me. “Hey, you there.” *Ugh. Can’t avoid this any longer, can I?* I do my best to refrain from grinding my teeth in frustration. *He’s got me cornered.*

“I heard you’re only here for tonight—that true?” He lifts his glass up to his lips, looking at me with upturned eyes.

His abrupt question takes me off guard for a moment—*but it would be suspicious if I stay silent for too long*—so I try my best to remain composed, keeping my eyes averted.

“Yes sir, only for tonight. Just helping out.”

“Just helping? Hm. Can you hold your liquor?”

“I’d like to think that I can, yes.”

“That so? Make sure you aren’t pressured into drinking too much. Women these days tend to let their guard down too often, so a kid like you really ought to be more careful in a place like this.”

“Thank you for your concern, but I am not so careless that I would let someone take advantage of me like that.”

“Hmm, if you say so. Say, you haven’t looked at me once this whole time we’ve been talking. Something wrong?”

“Hahaha! Goodness me, my shyness must be getting the better of me.”

“Really? You don’t look like the shy type...”

“Perhaps, dear sir, you have bad eyesight? You are wearing glasses, are you not?”

“I’m seeing better than I usually do right now.”

I grit my teeth, then force a smile on my face as I stare down at the counter. “Sure you don’t need to be prescribed *something stronger*?”

“...Stubborn as a child, aren’t you?” I can feel his gaze boring into me. *He knows—or at least, he suspects.* I’d spoken to him in perfectly dulcet tones, but my refusal to make eye contact must’ve made him suspicious. *He’s too sharp for his own good, the bastard.*

A true gentleman wouldn’t show his suspicion so openly. I don’t care whether Rockmann’s got the reputation of a village idiot or some social butterfly—this so-called “Knight” is as inconsiderate as they get, in my opinion.

“Captain, what’s your type of girl?” says the Knight sitting next to him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you like talkative girls like this, or something? You don’t talk or smile this much with the girls over at Dolmott, that’s for sure.” The Knight’s resting his chin on one hand, watching our exchange with wide eyes. *What happened to the Mr. Sleepy Face of five minutes ago?*

“Girls like this.” That’s got to be referring to me, right? Maybe he’s got eyes just as bad as his eyes. We’ve barely spoken with each other, let alone smiled. Rockmann looks like he’s honestly angry at me over something—this other Knight must be pretty drunk to think that he’s enjoying our conversation.

“To tell the truth,” the drunken Knight says, “this kinda girl is actually just my type.” He takes off his thin leather gloves and stretches out one hand towards me. *Okay, sure, he’s drunk—but what’s he trying to do with that hand of his?* Even with all my experience serving people as a receptionist, I’m quite at a loss. As I’m gently pushing him away with my left hand, I lose my balance and pitch forward.

The drunken Knight stretches out another hand, grabbing again—but someone else grabs my right wrist. “It’s like I said,” I hear a low growl in my ear.

“Huh? Wha—” Something—someone?—yanks me forward.

I fall even further, to the point where the whole upper half of my body is sticking out over the counter. In response to all the grabbing and pulling, my carefully arranged hair is undone, falling straight down to rest on the big black-gloved hand gripping my wrist.

“This isn’t any kind of place for a kid to be working.” More growling. I slowly look up the arm to meet his—Rockmann’s—eyes. Contrary to the anger in his voice, he has a calm expression on his face. Still hasn’t let go of my arm, though.

What did he say just now? Did he just call me a “kid” again? What a bastard.

“I’ll have you know that I’m not a ‘kid.’” *I’m the same age as you, dummy.* I refrain from saying that latter bit aloud, and only allow a trace of discomfort to creep into my voice. He’s condescending to me, sure, but I’m not humiliated to the point where I’d reveal who I really am.

“You’re a kid. Your arms and wrists are pale and thin, your neck so weak it looks like it could break in a light breeze.” He slides his gloved hand up my arm,

softly caressing each body part that he names as if to check the truth of his words. He's sitting down, but because I've practically fallen down across the counter, it's as though he's looking down at me as he traces his fingers against my skin.

Ahhh! His face is close—too close! He draws nearer, and my long brown hair mingles with his hateful, shimmering gold locks.

"H-Hey, what do you—"

The heck is going on here? What's he trying to pull? I always knew he was a womanizer who hit on practically every woman in sight, but is he trying to sweet talk me right now?

This must be how he seduces all the other women. They sure put up with quite a bit. It's taking all I have not to fling my arm and send him flying through the air right now.

Ms. Weira would give him a whack and a good talking-to if she were here right now. My eyes dart over to where she's standing—watching this all unfold—and all she's doing is giving me a big thumbs up. "*Oh, I wish I were you!*" she seems to be saying with her face. *Dammit. She's taken in by his hatefully handsome face as well.*

"Why, just look at your fingers, all small and dainty-like," Rockmann continues. "You stay long in a place like this," he says, taking my hand in both of his, eyes flickering like embers, "and someone's gonna eat you right up." Then, as if it's the most natural thing in the world to do, he slowly takes my middle finger, lifts it up to his parted lips—

"Could you NOTTT!!!"

Screw you, you disgraceful bastard! I'm gonna freakin' BOOM you!!

I can endure no more. I wrench my arm out of his grip and hide my hands behind my back.

The Knight sitting next to him has his eyes wide, staring at me, but I pay him no mind. *He went too far. Criminally far, in fact. I'd very much like to teach him a lesson right now.*

“You try doing that again and you’ll be seeing me in COURT, you insolent Fire FOOL!”

“Oho...!”

“...Shoot!”

Rockmann slowly takes off his glasses and brushes back his disarrayed bangs...to reveal red eyes gleaming with a devilish sort of amusement.

“You said earlier you weren’t the careless type...but you really *are*, aren’t you?”

It would seem that I can indeed be careless, from time to time.

He raises his hand to get Ms. Weira’s attention. “Madam, mind if I borrow this girl for a bit?”

“Go right ahead! Don’t do anything she won’t like though, you hear?”

Whatever happened to her protective mother persona?? Ms. Weira’s shooing me away with her hand, urging me to follow Rockmann outside. *No. Nononononono! Why did the night have to take such a vexing turn for the worse? I’ve no idea what he intends to say, but no doubt he’s going to make fun of me, or tell me I’m stupid or something.* I let out a long sigh. *Maybe, the instant we’re out of sight of everyone else, I’ll give him a swift kick to the head and knock him out. That sounds a good deal more fun than hearing him talk, that’s for sure.* I resolve to resist going along with the flow of events. *Sorry, Benjamine, I’ve got to bounce. This is just bad. I’ll slip out the back door, and never see him again.*

Or, I *would* have told someone I was leaving—had my mouth not been spelled shut. *This is a Silencing Spell.* No matter how hard I try to open my mouth, my lips remain firmly stuck together, and all I can do is groan. From another person’s perspective, it probably looks like I’m chewing on a particularly tough piece of meat. *Only he could have cast this on me, when I wasn’t paying attention.* I give him a good, hard glare, but he ignores me like he would a passing gust of wind. With one hand on my back—my neck, actually—he guides—leads—pushes me outside.

Right before we pass through the doorway, I hear one of the Knights from the

inner tables shout, “Look! The Captain’s taking a girl outside!” *You call this being “taken outside”? It feels like I’m being arrested, to be perfectly honest.*

With one last desperate look back, I silently plead for help from Nikeh and Benjamine—but they’re just over there, giggling in the corner. *Ah! My heart breaks for our lost friendship. Despair, I feel, despair!* The crushing, inescapable dread of a conversation with Rockmann weighs me down. I’m not so uncivilized that I’d start a fight indoors, so I do as he wants, and go outside without a struggle.

“So what’s this all about?” I ask him, but he doesn’t answer immediately.

We’re standing in a dim alleyway between Derahle and the neighboring establishment. The night is full of sounds. I hear the sugary sweet whispers of women soliciting business from the men passing by, I hear their lively, interested voices in response. I hear the breaking of glass, the flickering *buzz* of restaurant lights about to break. I hear the *creak* of the stairs outside a bar, the rusty *squeal* of a door opening, the ringing of a bell. I hear the faint rustle of scattered trash rolling down the sides of the street.

I can also smell the pungent odor of tobacco, I can feel that distinct *smokiness* in the air. *Someone must’ve been smoking in this alleyway just moments ago.*

Personally, I don’t feel very strongly about smoking tobacco, one way or another—I don’t smoke myself, but the ashy, acrid aroma suits the slightly *dangerous* vibe of this part of town.

“So,” Rockmann says, “have you decided to switch jobs, or something? Does the Director of Harré know about this?” *Whoa, there, bud. What’s with the interrogation?* I scowl at the sudden questioning. He’s got this wry smile on his face as he waits for my reply. *That smile—it’s even more suspect than usual. What’s with the leading question, anyway? Like I’d ever quit my receptionist job, idiot.*

The alleyway is gloomy and humid, a thin, dark mist surrounding us on all sides. My eyes get used to the lack of light, however, and eventually I can see Rockmann’s silhouette, then his face. He’s standing just an arm’s length away from me. My eyes are drawn to the embossed coat of arms on the breast pocket of his uniform, along with the twinkling gold of its buttons.

“You think you can disguise yourself by just changing the color of your hair? It was so obvious, I almost *laughed*.”

“Oh, shut up. I tried speaking in a different voice, didn’t I?”

He’d apparently lifted the Silencing Spell at some point, because now I can say *just what I’d like*. After having been forced to be quiet, the sound of my own voice takes me by surprise—I clench my fists then, taking a deep breath, force myself to relax.

Rockmann must notice how on edge I am, because he quickly grabs both of my wrists, like he’s a hunter and I’m some sort of wild animal preparing for fight or flight. Instantly, I lift my eyes to see him pursing his lips, sizing me up.

We make eye contact—I glare at him, undaunted. “I’m *not* going to hit you, if that’s what you’re wondering.” *I’d certainly be happy to, however. Just tell me when!*

I squirm a little, trying to get out of his grip. *Cut it out, you touchy-feely bastard!* The skin on my wrists rubs against the smooth leather of his gloves.

“Just let me go already! Considering what happened inside Derahle, I have half a mind to sue you. It’s *creepy*, having you touching me all over like that—”

“You’ve got a *dirty* mouth.”

He’s still grabbing both of my wrists as he pushes me up against the wall behind me. I turn as far away as I can to avoid his gaze.

I shout so loud my hair stands on end. “You really make me angry, you know!”

“You get angry rather often,” he whispers in my ear, teasing me. He’s told me I’ve got a “dirty mouth” several times before, but it still pisses me off every time he does so. I stamp my feet on the ground in frustration. *I don’t need to explain myself to him, do I? He doesn’t need to know all the reasons why I’m working here tonight.*

Rockmann’s peering down at me through those glasses of his. Uneasy at his silence, I ask, “Why would *you* care about what I do in my free time anyway?” He blinks, then closes his eyes for a few seconds before responding.

“Shouldn’t *you* care if people find out a Harré employee is working at a place

like this? Think before you act.”

“I’m disguised, aren’t I?”

“It’s a pretty *awful* disguise.”

“Awful?!”

“If we were back at school and we had a ‘disguise exam,’ you’d be failing. Normally, I wouldn’t talk to you in a place like this...but soon enough, there’ll be an official request for a protection detail made by the Kingdom, to Harré’s Guild of Sorcerers. I can’t tell you the details just yet, but it’s about demons. I don’t want you causing any problems before then.”

He closes one eye, then lets out a sigh.

“Huh?”

I’d been about to blow up with irritation about his suggestion that I’d fail a hypothetical exam back at school—*but what’s this talk about a request for a “protection detail”? I haven’t heard anything about that.*

Basically, he’s trying to say that he doesn’t want the public to form a bad impression of Harré by learning that I, an employee of the Guild, am secretly working at a bar across the street from an establishment like Dolmott... Even so, is he telling me the truth? The Director herself gave me permission to work here tonight. Surely she wouldn’t have done so had she been concerned about the Guild’s reputation.

I furrow my brow and look up at him with a puzzled expression.

“‘Protection detail’? What’s that about? Just what are we supposed to protect?”

“Ask the Director of Harré that question.”

“You drag me all the way out here, only to tell me I should ask *someone else* a question? Wow.”

None of the people walking by on the main road turn to look at us. *Well, it is a bit dark, so they probably don’t even realize that we’re standing here. Or rather, they don’t want to realize, considering what might be going on here.* The only type of people who frequent dark alleys at night are scary folks, like drunk-out-

of-their-minds bastards, criminals or worse. At least, that's how I imagine the people lurking in these places, prejudiced as that line of thinking may be. *When cornered by a man in a place like this, the best course of action is to give him a swift kick to the crotch before turning tail and sprinting away.*

But...I can't do that tonight.

I'm in this part of town right now because I'm trying to help a friend. If I waste time arguing with Rockmann about something stupid, it'll take away from my efforts to help Benjamine. I sigh, defeated.

"Um, you wanted to know why I'm working here tonight?" He nods. I scowl at him a bit before I grudgingly, reluctantly, *unwillingly*—offer him an explanation.

Before I do so, however, the sleeve on my left arm needs adjusting. *It feels like it's going to slide off.* I reach over with my right hand to fix it, but Rockmann's quicker than I am. He gives it a tug up, folds down my collar a bit, and pats my shoulder when he's done. "How indecent of you," he says, tsking, "letting your clothes get like that."

...Thank you, NOT. I don't need you taking care of my clothes.

"Who're you calling 'indecent'!" I flush red, then shake my head. *Getting back on track:* "The reason I'm working here tonight is because Benjamine's heard that Satanás has been seeing some other woman here, and we're, ah, trying to do a little investigation."

"Oh. So *that's* what this is about." He shakes his head, laughing.

"Yeah, that's pretty much... Hold on?! Did you know he was seeing someone else?!"

I do a double take at him. Despite the incredible lengths Nikeh and I are going to in order to help out Benjamine, here this guy is, ridiculing our efforts. *Who the heck does he think he is, condescending to me like this?*

"The real question," he says, "is why you're still sneaking around, acting like you're a detective. Haven't you learned your lesson by now?"

"Don't you talk to me about that business with the masquerade! I'd very much like to forget about all that."

I certainly never want you to call me your “Dear Golden Butterfly” ever again. I wrap my arms around my waist, feeling a bit ill at the memory of that night. Rockmann just snorts with laughter when he sees how uncomfortable I am—but then he starts talking about Satanás again, so I refrain from giving him a much-needed lesson in *manners*.

“From what I know,” he says, “Satanás is planning on entering the Wall Helenus.”

“Satanás? Really?”

“Sorcerers can post ‘party members wanted’ ads at Harré, can’t they? He said he saw one that was for putting together a team for the Wall Helenus, and decided to respond to the ad. There are women on his team, and he’s been going out drinking with them at night while they look for more members.”

Rockmann’s leaning against the wall next to me, arms folded. He takes out a brown cigar from his breast pocket and lights it with a burst of flame from the tip of his finger. Brushing his hair back behind his ear, I see his eyes narrow at the glow of the cigar. He takes a huff, leans his head back, and blows white smoke up into the sky.

I’ve never seen him smoke before. It’s not surprising to see him do so, exactly, but up until now I’d had this image of “smokers” as being more middle-aged people, like my father—something only adults do. *Huh. So even Rockmann, a guy my own age, likes smoking.* Strangely, I’m a little impressed. *Guess he is an adult after all—just like me.*

The white smoke assumes the shape of an animal as he puffs it out, bouncing and playing in the air above us. *Must be doing that with magic.* I roll my eyes. *Here I am, asking serious questions about serious matters, and he’s playing with imaginary pets.*

I prod him to get his attention. “Satanás is going to compete without Benjamine?” *If the only reason he’s meeting up with other women is to join the Wall Helenus, why can’t he just tell her that?*

A long time ago, my mother told me that when it comes to relationships between men and women, “talking is more important than kissing.” The worst type of relationship was a wordless one, in her mind.

When I'd asked her why that was, she'd said, "Say you have a guy who hasn't *said the words*—if you kiss him, he'll *never* say them. If there's something you *want him to say*, you can't just kiss him without a thought. Once you've grown up, you should be careful around men like that, okay?"

I have no idea what sort of romantic experiences my mother has had, but she always had a lot of advice when it came to the topic of love and relationships.

"Yeah, he hasn't told Feltina about it—" (Rockmann never referred to Benjamine by her first name) "—but Satanás isn't trying to sneak around behind her back... He isn't doing anything she needs to be worried about. Surprisingly, he's a pretty straightforward, earnest guy." He pauses, glancing at me sideways. "Unlike this other woman I know. She's this impudent Ice Idiot who wouldn't understand a sincere guy like him."

"How 'bout you quit beating around the bush and just *name* me, huh?"

This guy always has to take it a step too far. Two steps too far, in fact. Nasty man.

I look away from him. *I must say I am surprised to hear he's going to compete in the tournament. And the woman he was out with the other night—she's very likely one of his team members.*

"I don't think he'll come drinking at Derahle's anymore," Rockmann says after another puff.

"Why not?"

"Cambell works here, doesn't she? It sounds like he figured that out the last time he was here. He's perceptive about that sort of stuff, so I'm guessing he's out drinking somewhere else tonight."

"Huh?"

"That sort of stuff?" Is he saying that Satanás would guess Cambell would tell Benjamine about what he did at the bar, and so went somewhere else to avoid getting found out?

If Satanás really did think that through, he's a pretty sharp guy. Back in magic school, he'd always been moaning about how stupid he felt he was, but he'd

managed to breeze through every important exam—and then started working as a sorcerer, as if doing so was as easy as breathing for him. *Not only that, he went from “Associate” to “Expert” sorcerer in the blink of an eye.* Perhaps his ability to do *those* things, and his ability to suss out the finer social consequences of his own behavior, are not quite the same—but still, it’s as if every time he finds an obstacle in his path, he slips right past it, quick and unstoppable as the wind.

Perhaps all Wind mages have that kind of personality. I shake my head. *No, I shouldn’t stereotype people like that. That’s his personality.* I glance back at the busy, well-lit street. *I should head on back inside to tell Benjamine what’s going on. But first—*

I turn back to Rockmann and cock my head to one side. “Why *are* you against Doran hosting the Wall Helenus?”

“You were listening?”

“Just happened to overhear your conversation, that’s all.”

“Hmmm...” His eyes glow with a scornful suspicion as he looks down at me, his glasses and his height all adding to his aura of total intimidation. *But I’m not scared—I wasn’t eavesdropping. I just happened to wonder about something I heard him saying, that’s all. After all, shouldn’t a Captain in the Knight’s Order support the royal family’s decision to host the tournament? There are already posters for the Wall Helenus all over the Kingdom—all over the continent, in fact. There’s even one inside Derahle! Everyone is so excited to see it happen...aren’t they?*

I guess not. He sounds like he thinks it would be some lame burlesque, like one of the “shows” that happen inside Dolmott. For a guy who doesn’t usually opine too strongly either way on things, it seems he feels quite strongly about the Wall Helenus. Why in the world would he be this negative about it?

I put my hands on my hips and cock my head to one side. “You got a problem with me overhearing your conversation? Then don’t say things like that in public!”

“Curse your big ears,” he mutters.

You're one to talk! If you dyed your hair black and started talking differently, I don't think I'd notice that easily—but you with your BIG EYES saw right through my disguise in an instant! Keep your opinions about other people's body parts to yourself, dummy.

I start asking him more about why he's against the tournament. Once I am the one asking questions, he averts his gaze, chewing on his lower lip for a moment, then looks back at me. He points one finger upwards and spins it in a circle several times, creating a soundproof barrier around us before replying.

“...You know what the Queen of Orcinus was collecting, don't you?”

Ah. If this is related to Queen Orcinus—related to the woman who took him captive while he was shapeshifted into my body, then nearly killed him—it must be top secret. I don't see the connection between her and the Wall Helenus, however.

“Yeah, basically.” She'd been gathering the blood of Ice-type maidens. For what purpose, I'd not been told, nor could I guess.

“Right now, the Knights in Vestanu have locked up one of her former aides, and are interrogating him. The other day, I heard he told his captors a rather odd story.”

“Odd?”

“He said that the Queen had been tempted by the Devil—it had told her that if she gathered the ‘blood of Ice,’ it could *bring someone back to life.*”

The Devil?

Rockmann notices my confusion. “By ‘Devil,’ he meant ‘demon,’ obviously.”

...Tempted by the Devil?

“Can demons *speak?*”

“Who knows? I've seen... You were there too, weren't you? You saw that *thing* back at Castle Shuzelk—it was capable of some sort of communication.”

The demon we saw back at Castle Shuzelk...it said something about a “Städal,” then disappeared. No one's yet explained what that was all about. Maybe that was the thing that had possessed the Queen of Orcinus?

“We believe,” Rockmann continues, “that thing might have been the ‘Devil’ her aide was referring to.” He pauses, looks at me—then goes on. “The aide also told Vestanu what the Queen of Orcinus said when asked *why* she needed the ‘blood of Ice’—though whether these were Queen’s words or the demon’s words are unclear, given that it was probably possessing her when she said this.”

“What did she say?”

“Apparently,” he sighs, “the Queen of Orcinus said she wanted to ‘resurrect a young woman she’d loved,’ ever since she was very young. A woman she’d loved more than anyone else, a woman she’d loved so much she dreamed of her every night, desiring for their hearts to become *one*.”

Rockmann looks up at the stars. “She died, of course, without resurrecting anyone. But she did say the same thing right before she breathed her last—so I’m inclined to believe that what the aide said was true.” He’s silent for a while after saying this. *He must be remembering that battle.*

He doesn’t go on to mention *why* the Queen said that in front of him, or who he thought the young woman was and how she might have been related to the Queen.

“Of all the blood she collected, there was only a tiny amount left by the time we arrived on the scene. No sign of where the rest might have gone, nor any answers to the obvious questions: why did the ‘Devil’ demon prey on the weakness of the Queen, and tell her she could *resurrect* someone? Why gather the blood of mages?” He shakes his head. “Of course, those questions assume that she *did* agree to do as the Devil suggested.”

“You’re sure it was only blood from Ice mages? What if she was planning on harvesting blood from all types, in a set order?”

“We don’t know for sure. We *can’t* know. That’s why I don’t support holding the tournament. Mages of all six types, from all over the continent, will be gathered together—a target.” He takes another huff of his cigar. “I can’t guarantee that it’ll be safe there. We don’t know enough about this ‘Devil.’ As a Knight, my responsibility is to protect the Kingdom, to protect the *King*—and yet we have zero idea what our enemy is capable of. That’s why I’m not excited

about the Wall Helenus.” Rockmann finished off his cigar and flicked it away, letting it roll on the ground.

I step away from the wall and begin walking back towards the restaurant.

“One more thing,” he says, clapping his hands. I stop, turning around to see him standing right in front of me. He takes another step closer, forcing me to angle my head up even high to meet his gaze.

Should I have pressed him so hard about the Wall Helenus? Sounds like he just told me a lot of top-secret Knight business. I appreciate him actually answering my questions, but still... He’s just a hand’s breadth away from me, but I don’t mind. I’m honestly curious to hear what he says next.

Rockmann slowly tilts his head to one side, looking deep into my eyes. “You are—”

“Ahh! Quit shoving, dumbass!”

“The rest of you, wait up, go back—ahh!”

Rockmann and I spin our heads to see the source of the sudden commotion erupting out of Derahle’s front door. Standing there on the streets is a pileup of drunken Knights that have apparently just finished drinking, including the flaxen-haired Knight who Rockmann had been sitting next to at the bar. They’re all looking at us. I make eye contact with a few of them.

“Hhhheeeeyyyy!” One of the Knights seems to be holding back laughter as he waves at me. Reflexively, I wave back.

The next instant, all of the Knights’ heads are on fire.

“I’m gonna go BALD! BALD!”

“Captain, stop it!”

So that’s what I look like when he’s burning my hair off.

The wailing Knights are rolling around on the ground in futile attempts to extinguish the flames. I stare at Rockmann. *Um, hello? Aren’t they your friends...?*

“Come on, don’t look at me like that. It’s not real fire. They’ll be fine. Gotta

discipline my subordinates somehow.” At the word “discipline,” he stops the flames. All the Knights get on their hands and knees to beg for his forgiveness. Begrudgingly, he accepts their apology, and all of them—including Rockmann—go back inside Derahle.

I’m left standing alone in the alleyway, thinking aloud:

“What in the world was *that* about?” As I replay my conversation with Rockmann over and over in my head, I slowly make my own way back inside.

* * * *

“WHAT?! He hasn’t told me *anything* about that!”

Benjamine’s pressing her crimson face close to mine. *Oooh, she’s angry.* Her breathing is irregular, like a bull that’s just seen red.

“Rockmann—said—that there was nothing—you needed—to worry about—Benjamine—STOP.”

Nikeh’s lying on her side, snacking on some fried dessert. There are a few crumbs sticking to her lips. “Well, it’s all good then, yeah? If the Captain says you don’t have to worry, why don’t you just wait until Satanás has the courage to tell you what he’s doing himself?”

After finishing our shift without further ado, we’re in Cambell’s room, where we’ll sleep for tonight. We’re sprawled out on top of our four beds, in our pajamas, talking about everything that happened tonight. My bed’s the one closest to the window, which is covered with a lovely pink lace. Through the glass, I can see a sliver of the moon. It looks a bit chilly outside, but the soft pillow under my head and the flickering light of the candles in their pony-shaped holders make it feel all nice and cozy.

“To think!” Benjamine’s getting hysterical again. “Our little Nanalie was out in the back alley having an *intimate* conversation with Rockmann—and the topic was *Satanás!*”

“Hey! You weren’t there—don’t go calling us ‘intimate.’”

In the end, it happened just as Rockmann said it would: Satanás never showed up at Derahle. Benjamine was beyond despondent by the time we went up to

Cambell's room for the night, so, being the good friend that I am, I told her what Rockmann had told me—and ever since then, she's been alternately screaming and shaking me back and forth, hands locked in a death grip on my poor shoulders.

Oooh I'm gonna be sick—

As he was leaving Derahle around closing time, Rockmann *had* actually pulled me aside and told me to do just this: *“Let Feltina know what's going on with Satanás. He's waiting for the right opportunity to tell her himself, but as a man, he's obligated to put her at ease about his nighttime...activities.”* At the time, I think I'd said something like, *“If Satanás doesn't want to tell her, then shouldn't I keep quiet?”* Looking back, that had been quite a stupid thing to say. We'd gone all out to help Benjamine get to the bottom of Satanás's mystery girl, and here I was, trying to stay quiet.

After our conversation out in the alleyway, he'd left his spot at the counter to sit with the Commander and the other Knights. They'd left *minutes* before closing—*really wish he would've dragged them all out there earlier*—but he'd left without causing me any more trouble, so I couldn't complain. I'd been tense the whole rest of the night, however, especially when the Knights had filed out the door, each staring at me in turn. *Ugh! Shouldn't they be a little more chivalrous? They are Knights, after all...*

To be perfectly honest, I don't care in the *slightest* why Satanás hasn't told Benjamine about his intentions to join the Wall Helenus, but I don't want to be the reason they break up. *Well, the cat's out of the bag now. Too late to get worried about that.*

All I've told her is that there's “nothing to worry about,” but the more I say, the more she worries. “If he's going to fight in a huge tournament like the Wall Helenus, I want to fight with him! Why's he on a team with another woman?!?!”

“Ngh—ah!”

I'm going to die! Honest to God, she is ripping my arms out of their sockets! She's rocking me back and forth so fast I'm seeing double Benjamine. Cambell, fortunately, steps in to save the day. “Now now, Benjamine—let's not shake

Nanalie's poor shoulders like that. Let go." Cambell gently removes Benjamine's claw-like talons digging into my shoulders, bringing the world's-worst-earthquake to an end. My head's spinning so fast I feel like throwing up.

My nausea, however, is nothing compared to how Benjamine must be feeling, hearing about how the guy she's got a crush on—the man she loves—is meeting with strange women on the sly to participate in a tournament without even asking her if she wants to join. *It's my fault for telling her too much. Now we're even.* After both Cambell and Nikeh have given Benjamine a stern talking to, she finally calms down. Somewhat, at least; her brow's still furrowed with distress, but she's no longer shaking her friends silly.

"I've said too much," I say. *Oh Gods, Oh King Doran, Oh my dear, dear Mother—forgive me, for I have sinned.* I, the fool who has completely ruined everyone's night by terribly upsetting Benjamine with news of Satanás's secret rendezvous, bow my head to my friends in apology. *I am so, so sorry. I should never stick my nose into the romantic affairs of others. I shall never do so again.*

Nikeh doesn't seem to think I've gone too far. "Don't worry about it, Nanalie! It's fine. If you *hadn't* asked Rockmann what was going on, and then told the rest of us, we would've been chasing our tails for weeks trying to figure it all out! Come on, Benjamine, don't cry like that—you need to talk with him about this, face to face!" She ties up her glossy blond hair into a ponytail, then goes over to pat Benjamine's back. *Ah. I'm so glad I have a friend like her—she smooths things out when things get crazy. Don't know what we'd do without her.*

"I've had enough! I'm leaving!"

"Wh-What?"

Oh dear. Maybe Nikeh's words were the straw that broke the camel's back...? Benjamine leaps out of her bed, clenches her hands into fists, and nods to herself. She's looking straight ahead, at the door, and hyperventilating again.

"Where are you going?" I ask her, bewildered.

"To see Naru, of course!" I can *hear* the air rushing in and out of her nostrils. In less than ten seconds, she's apparently resolved to do exactly as Nikeh suggested: talk to Satanás, face to face.

Nikeh seems to realize what she's unleashed. "But it's the middle of the night! Just—cool it, okay?" Benjamine shakes her head firmly.

"Hold on, hold up now! I'm sorry for saying all that!"

"It's all secondhand information, so let's take a moment to think it through, there's no need to act now—"

Try as we might to stop her from leaving, she absolutely refuses to hear us out. *She's a stubborn one, that's for sure, and all I've done by telling her all this tonight is to make her even more determined to confront Satanás, right now.*

I wrap my arms around my soft pink pillow and squeeze it tight.

"I don't know what Naru thinks he's doing by hiding this from me, but as a colleague—as his *partner sorcerer*—I need to know why he can't come work with me anymore."

"But surely you don't need to ask him that now—"

"Nanalie, don't *you* understand? This is interfering with my ability to do my job! Imagine if one of your co-workers suddenly stopped showing up for work one day?"

Setting aside whether that analogy actually *worked* or not, that's how Benjamine understands the whole situation: trouble at the workplace. *Sure, she may get less reward money on her own because she can't take on as much work—but she gets to keep all the reward money for herself! Isn't that nice?* Benjamine doesn't seem to care about the financial aspect of the situation, however.

"Rather than regretting something I *didn't* do," she says, working herself up again, "I'd rather regret something I *did* do!" She rushes to put on her clothes, then grabs her bag and runs to the window, opens it, and sticks one lovely leg outside.

What in the world is she doing??

I dart over to stop her—but she just looks back at me, smiling widely. "Thanks for telling me, Nanalie. Later!"

The three of us with our feet firmly on the ground are watching her with our

jaws dropped. She laughs, summons her familiar, leaps on its back, and flies off up into the night sky.

Cambell's whisper breaks the silence. "She is so cool."

Several hours later, Benjamine flies back to us. "I forced Naru to come clean about participating in the Wall Helenus—and he invited me to join him," she says, smiling. "We're a team again."

* * * *

There are a lot of sorcerers at Harré today, all lined up at the reception counters, waiting patiently for work. *Now that we're in the latter half of the work week, I suppose it's not too unusual for it to be this crowded.* I glance out the nearby windows. *But I'm guessing a fair amount of them saw the cool, clear skies this morning and felt like it was the perfect day for some sorcery.*

My father had come in earlier in the morning, right when my shift started. Said he wanted to "check in on me," or something. I'd *really* rather him not do that sort of thing as it's absolutely *mortifying* to be treated like a child in front of my fellow receptionists—but I was actually glad to see *him* happy and full of energy. *Maybe it's not the worst thing in the world if he comes to my reception desk from time to time. Maybe.*

Mid-morning, around the time I'm thinking back on my father's visit, someone taps me on my shoulder. It's the Director. She'd come in at around the same time I had this morning. *Oh, that's right—she did want to talk with me about something, didn't she?* We head into her office, sit down, and the first thing she tells me is that she wants me to start working the night shift.

"The night shift?"

"Yes. I think it's about time we started having you try that out." She flashes me a smile, handing me a stack of papers detailing the duties of those working the night shift. "We'll mix it up a little, you know—have you learn how to do some new tasks."

I stare down at the papers, my shoulders trembling. "Would that—would that really be alright?!" My eyes are so wide they're practically popping out of their sockets. It's like she's just dangled a freshly cooked bunny-bird right before my

eyes. I'd meant to ask her about the Kingdom's request for Harré to provide a "protective detail" the other day, but now's *definitely* not the time to change the subject.

The Director's leaning back in her chair, sipping her tea, watching me take all of this in.

Lightly staffed by only a few receptionists, and without Mr. Alkes or the Director, working the night shift meant being trusted with the Guild *itself*. *I've just started my second year—which means I've only been working here for a little over a year. In that time, not only did I start working the sorcerer's reception desks after only six months since I came to Harré, but now she's promoting me to night shift as well? It sounds too good to be true!*

Maybe it is too good to be true. Am I really ready for that sort of responsibility...?

"Nanalie?" The Director says, obviously concerned about my silence. "Everything all right? Perhaps you're still uneasy about the idea of working the night shift?"

"Not at all!"

Sure, I am a little uneasy about being given so much responsibility—but if the Director's confident I can pull it off, there's no reason for me to refuse to do as she asks.

"Oh, that's right! There's one more thing I wanted to ask you."

"What might that be?"

"I'm sorry for asking for this at the same time I'm having you start the night shift," she says apologetically, "but I'd also like you to do reception for the Wall Helenus."

"You want me to be a receptionist...for the Wall Helenus?"

Did she really just ask me that? I must have misheard. Me? A receptionist for the Wall Helenus tournament?

I'm stunned. The Director sees my surprised expression and laughs really hard. "Ahaha! Ahaha—ahem," she catches herself, clearing her throat. "The

Kingdom made a formal request for our assistance: three Guild employees, to work as receptionists for the event. I've been thinking about who to send—they told me it'd be best to send receptionists that all had different magic types—and I thought you, Nanalie, would be just the right Ice-type to go."

Wha-What? Me? Why? Being offered the night shift was surprising enough, but now Wall Helenus reception? It's too much! There's nothing better than being given more work to do, but how am I supposed to handle all this?

"What sort of, um, tasks might I be expected to perform?"

"Good question. Compared to the normal reception work you do here at Harré, you may need to use more magic. There's going to be a *lot* you need to do, okay?"

"So...practically speaking...what sort of duties should I prepare for?"

"Oh, explaining all that would take forever! I'll gather together everything you need to know and give it to you sometime soon." She gives me a wink, then dismisses me. I head out of her office and quietly close the door.

What...just happened? I stare at the worn wood of the door. In my hands, I'm holding the operations manual for night shift workers. Slowly, I turn away from the Director's office and begin walking down the hall back towards my desk, turning her words over and over in my mind.

* * * *

It's a few hours after my meeting with the Director. I'm sitting in the canteen while on my break, looking through the operations manual she gave me. Ms. Harris, carrying her lunch tray, comes and sits across the table from me.

"Nanalie, what's the matter?" she asks. "You look so *serious* today."

The food on her tray catches my eye. *Mostly vegetables. Huh. Didn't she say the other day that she "felt fat," or something? She must be trying to lose weight with a diet like that.* I blink a few times in surprise, then look up at Ms. Harris. *She doesn't look like she needs to be concerned about her weight. Then again, it's the skinny people who care most about how much they weigh, isn't it? Funny how that works. Or maybe she's always working hard not to gain weight, and that's why she's not fat—she's sensitive about her figure.*

All this runs through my mind as I watch Ms. Harris chewing a large mouthful of vegetables. Carefully, as if it's made of the finest paper in the world, I lay one hand on the stack of papers in front of me.

"What's that?"

"It's the night shift operations manual."

"Oho!" Ms. Harris imitates our dorm mother's habitual reaction to hearing interesting gossip. She laughs as I roll my eyes at this routine.

I must say, she really does a good imitation.

"So that means," she says, most suggestively, "you're to become a Lady of the Night."

"Well I certainly wouldn't put it like *that*, but yes, essentially, the Director thinks I'm ready."

She didn't tell me what night I'd be starting, though. Still, she gave me this manual—she must be planning to put me on the schedule for the night shift sometime soon.

"That's right!" Ms. Harris perks up like she's just remembered something. "The members for the team are going to be decided."

By "team members," she must be talking about the plan the Director talked about in the last meeting: having some Harré employees form a team to compete in the Wall Helenus, in order to increase awareness of the Guild's work. The Director didn't specify whether she'd be having people volunteer to be on the team, or if she'd be "recommending" that they participate... I guess we'll find out at this meeting.

I find that I'm a little excited to find out who's going to be on our team. I've already been tasked with reception duties, so I know (with *near* total certainty) that I'm not going to be nominated as a member.

If both the Director and Mr. Alkes joined the team, we'd definitely place high in the competition—maybe even be the champions! I hold that glorious image of victory in my mind for a few moments before acknowledging the truth, sighing. *No way that could happen. It'd be pretty bad for both of them to be gone from*

the Guild for five whole days during the event.

The meeting happens right after everyone gets back from lunch. I'm given the role of "secretary" for the duration of the meeting (apparently it's a job for second-year employees), and so I'm busy writing everything down while the Director and everyone else is talking. After the meeting is over, I pack up my papers and head outside to the courtyard. Normally, I would just stay in the materials room after the meeting and organize my notes there, but all of the Guild higher-ups are still in there, presumably discussing something sensitive. Most of the other junior employees follow me out into the courtyard, taking a break to process what we all just heard. Some of them curl up on makeshift cots to take a nap, muttering a complaint or two before closing their eyes.

"Today's my day off, and I *still* had to come into work for a meeting... Doesn't that mean I worked today?"

Nobody seems like they're in any great rush to be off home, however. A good number of employees are sitting in the reclining chairs, chatting excitedly about the Harré team makeup.

While I'm sitting quietly at a table in the corner, shuffling through my papers and making edits to ensure all the meeting minutes are intelligible, a group of women gather around me. They're from the night shift, so they weren't at the meeting—they just woke up. Seeing the papers I'm holding, they begin commenting on the results of the meeting.

"So Mr. Alkes *was* roped into participating, just like I thought he would be."

"Anyone could have predicted that, obviously."

"There weren't any other surprises though, were there? Köln, Zozo, Moldina? I think everyone expected them to be on the team."

A few of them are munching on snacks as they read, sitting idly round my table, looking beautiful in their white Harré uniforms.

"I knew you weren't going to be on the team the moment I heard that the Director asked you to do reception for the event, in which case I'd have to think Deen is the best Ice mage we've got."

Three employees from Harré's North office—Mr. Alkes and Zozo included—

were chosen to be on the team, as well as one employee from the South office, and two from the West office. Ms. Deen is a senior receptionist who works in the South and is an Ice-type, just like me. We'd spoken to each other when I'd been down working in the Soreiyu District for a month. She's a friendly, talkative person; married, with a daughter—a working mother. She doesn't live in the dorms, but rather a house somewhere else in town, so we didn't have many opportunities to chat, but I remember her as someone who did her work quickly and correctly. *A good choice by the Director.* I finish writing the names of the six team members onto the summary of the meeting notes.

Ms. Pidget, who's also been asked to perform receptionist duties at the Wall Helenus, comes over and talks to me.

"Nanalie, the Director told me that there's going to be an orientation the day after tomorrow, for those working reception. It's being held at the palace. Want to go together?"

"What? Is there really going to be an orientation meeting held *there*?"

"Yeah. The Director forgot to tell you earlier, so she wanted me to let you know."

An orientation at the palace. It will be nice to have all our duties explained to us before the actual day of the event. I still need to know what, exactly, it is I'm doing, as well as what sort of arrangements are being made for us to do our work there. Being told directly by the managers of the tournament what's going to happen will be better than just puzzling through the handbook the Director gave me the other day.

More than half of the handbook had been filled with diagrams of the Wall Helenus arena—the arena that was yet to be constructed—and I'd found myself getting lost as I flipped through dozens of pages, lists of all the participating countries, descriptions of the events, and so on and so forth. I'd gotten no idea what I needed to prepare for. *A direct explanation from the top should clear all that up, though.*

The whole event is going to be overseen by people at the palace. The King himself is involved in discussions with the builders and architects. *All of Doran is full of anticipation for the event. Some of the responsibility for making sure the*

Wall Helenus goes smoothly falls to us receptionists from Harré—and I’m going to do my absolute best to make sure it does.

* * * *

“Wow!” Ms. Pidget says, raising her hands in admiration. “It’s been a long time since I was last at the palace. Just as big as I remember!” *Her excitement is contagious.* I smile and look up at the towering walls before us.

Ms. Pidget and I are at Castle Doran. We’re here on the Royal Isle to attend the orientation for all those who are doing reception for the Wall Helenus. We show our invitation to a guard at the gate, and he lets us inside the palace grounds. Waiting for us is a servant, looking as though they knew we’d arrive precisely at this moment. She bids us to follow her, and we obey.

I rub my fingertips against the soft, velvety paper of the invitation. *Just like everything else that comes from the palace—obviously, extravagantly, expensive and luxurious.* A frugal girl like me sees paper like this and thinks she could probably buy a whole house given the value of this paper.

This is my third time inside the palace. *Is that many times, or not many at all? I’d guess it’s more than average.*

Passing through the verdant green of the palace gardens, we go through the castle’s inner gate and finally enter the building itself. Ms. Pidget is walking next to me, eyes sparkling with wonder at the extravagance of the place. “I’ve always wanted to come inside here!”

“It’s very pretty, isn’t it?”

The palace: a place where princesses live, and all girls aspire to visit one day. According to surveys in the popular magazines, it is the number one place everyone in the Kingdom would like to visit. *Its reputation certainly isn’t just for show, either—it’s gorgeous here.*

Beautiful and grand as it may be, however, this is my third time here, so I’m not exactly overflowing with admiration for the beautiful architecture. *Actually, wasn’t I basically forced to come here the other two times? Feels like I’m here against my will, again...*

Not every commoner has the luxury of complaining that they “have to go to

the palace," I guess. I have a good reason, though: I had to come here the last two times because of that fool. I bite down on my lower lip, irritated at the thought of him. *It's only a slight exaggeration to say that he's screwed up my entire life, multiple times!* I pause, shaking my head. *Maybe a bit more than a slight exaggeration, but still.*

We are led inside a room for the orientation meeting. Several people are already seated at one long table, silently reading their event handbooks. *It's rather like the school library here, given how quiet it is.* Quiet as I can, I tip-toe forward, terrified at the idea of making a fool of myself in front of all these respectable individuals.

Where am I supposed to sit? I whisper to Ms. Pidget standing next to me. "What seats are ours, do you think...?"

"Those two over there, maybe? Looks like they've got our names on them." She swiftly makes her way over to the seats, and I hurry after her.

Once we're seated, more people enter the room, one after the other, until almost all the seats are filled. *The Director told me that there would be six people working reception, but from what I can see, there must be at least thirty people in this room. They can't all be here for a receptionist orientation. The others must be messengers and couriers.*

The last person to enter, an intelligent-looking man wearing glasses, addresses those seated. He's wearing the white robes of the Knight's Order. "I see that everyone has arrived." *He must be the leader for this orientation.*

"First, I'd like all of you to introduce yourself. Please," he says, sitting down in the center seat, looking around at everyone else.

We do as he asks. Beginning at one end of the table, everyone stands up and introduces themselves to the rest of the attendees. The only people from outside the palace are me and Ms. Pidget—the others all have titles like "Minister" and "Knight" and "Palace Physician." *They probably didn't even have to go outside to get here today.*

We, on the other hand, are complete outsiders. *I'm not gonna lie—it's a bit intimidating, sitting in here.* When I stand up to introduce myself, however, all I see around the table are warm smiles. *At least they seem kind.*

More papers are sent flying to each of us using a levitation spell. Following the self-introductions, the bespectacled man begins the meeting.

“Any who would voice a comment or opinion on the items described in the papers in front of you, please state your remarks from your seat in short order.”

A brief pause follows. No one speaks. Without further ado, the Knight begins addressing us with all the speed, precision, and fluency of someone reading a dictionary.

“The tournament will be five days long. The opening ceremonies shall be conducted on the first day. The tournament rules and matchups shall be announced then. The matchups between different teams shall be decided using a magical method; we will not be deciding who fights whom. Team battles will be held in the ground arenas on the second and third day. On the fourth day, we shall transfer to the sky arena for the championship match. Spectators will not be attending the match in person; they shall watch the match from the ground arenas. This will be made possible by the magical devices called ‘simultaneous projectors,’ developed by the Kingdom of Doran’s Ministry of Magical Research. They harness the principles of thoughtography to take the image of any object and project it to another location. From here on out, I will be referring to said ‘thoughtographs’ as ‘images,’ so please keep that in mind.”

He’s just saying what’s written on this paper. He might as well be a speaking handbook: doesn’t pause, doesn’t stutter, barely even takes a breath—a Knight who speaks with utter and complete efficiency.

He goes on talking like this for some while. At the beginning of the meeting, he’d told us to speak up if we wanted to say anything, but not a single person has so much as raised their hand. *Not that there’s anything to ask about. He’s explaining so much, there’s little we don’t know at this point.*

But the reason it feels like he is talking *for so long* is not because he’s just reading what’s on the paper—it’s because he’s actually talking about so many things.

The gist of it, at least as it relates to our jobs as receptionists, is as follows:

Receive money from the spectators and give them a ticket, or verify they have a ticket, and let them inside the arena.

Prevent all those without tickets from entering the arena, holding them until the Knights could escort them away.

Serve as witnesses for the signing of documents by the participants.

Have a good enough grasp on all the facilities and names of the event managers and tournament participants that, if asked anything by anyone, we would be able to have an answer for them.

That's all that is related to us, really. *It's not like we're being told that we can't take our notes along with us.* I look down at the pages I've filled. *I'll be sure to bring all this along with me during the days of the event.*

Next to me, Ms. Pidget has a small frown on her face as she looks through the handbook. "Are we really supposed to remember all this...?"

"We can just bring it along with us," I suggest.

"You're right!" She claps her hands, nodding to herself, and then continues to write more notes. "I wonder, though. Yakkurin couldn't come today—will he be okay for the event itself?"

From Harré, three of us employees had been chosen to support the event: Ms. Pidget, myself, and Mr. Yakkurin, who works at the South office. He's unfortunately not here today because he's got a cold. I'd asked the Director who'd take his place if he couldn't go, and she'd said she hadn't decided yet. *I just found out he's supposed to be joining us yesterday. Didn't even get a chance to talk with him yet.*

Ms. Pidget, on the other hand, seems like she talks with Mr. Yakkurin from time to time. "He was just out with a cold the other day, too! Good grief. He needs to work on that!" She laughs, shaking her head. *Sounds like they get along, at least.*

The orientation, which I'd been so nervous about, ends in the blink of an eye. The bespectacled man ushers us out of the room.

"Don't you think he's *rushing* us out of here? Rude."

"Ms. Pidget, please, shhhhh!"

The meeting had ended right on time. *It's less that we're being rushed out of*

here, and more like they want to stay precisely on schedule. They're proper like that. At Harré, though, we always have the chance to talk more with each other outside of the meetings, so it does feel a bit sharp for them to send us packing like that. He did explain everything perfectly well, though, so I suppose I can't complain.

I pause, recognize the ridiculousness of that thought, and shake my head. *Who do I think I am? Certainly no one who has any right to complain.*

The only attendees to be returning to the ground below appear to be Ms. Pidget and myself. *Well, of course that's the case. Everyone else works here at the palace.* The white Knight who escorted us to the meeting room leads us back outside.

"Whew," Ms. Pidget says, sighing. "I feel like a weight's just been lifted off my shoulders. To think that Ministers would be there at that meeting! We're not the only ones making this thing happen, that's for sure."

"The palace people *are* the ones in charge, after all."

"Midway through, I kinda thought, 'do they really need us'? Haha."

"I see your point. There were a good number of Knights there... Bit late for us to back out now, though."

"Yeah. Hm?"

As we're walking through the palace gardens, we hear cheerful voices chattering nearby. Ms. Pidget turns to see the source of the conversation. I follow her gaze to see a group of men and women, all apparently aristocrats.

"I wonder what they're up to," she says. We don't stop as we watch them, only walk more slowly.

The group (not that many people, really) looks to be a gathering of aristocrats standing around a lady wearing a light yellow dress, holding a baby. All of the men and women surrounding the woman coo and ahh at her baby, the very picture of peace.

Among the group are three acquaintances of mine.

Okay, if I just casually look away and speed up a little, then surely—

“Oho? Goodness *gracious*, me oh *my*, who might we have *here*, my dear?!”

A young lady in a red dress separates from the rest of the group. I hear a hint of hysteria in her voice as she calls out to me.

I ignore Ms. Pidget’s cries for me to stop walking away so quickly. *As if I’m going to let her catch me!*

“Hey! Don’t get so far ahead!” *Great. Now even our Knight escort is telling me to stop! Not that I’m going to.*

It wouldn’t do to run inside the palace, but she’s far more used to the layout of the grounds. No matter how briskly I walk, she’s going to catch up to me!

I can see the palace gates. *Just a few more steps and I’ll be able to leave—!*

There’s a sudden rush of air against my back. It’s not a breeze; I can feel the warmth of the person standing behind me. A hand with delicate fingers clamps on to my shoulder.

“Dear, have you *never* heard of a little thing called ‘manners’?” I am poked on the cheek. I turn around to see a beautiful young woman smiling at me.

Maris Caromines. She’s a former classmate of mine, and even now, more than a year after graduation, we’re still in contact with each other. Despite her status as a noble and mine as a commoner, over the course of six years together at school we’d become good friends. She sends me a letter every week, telling me all about her current role as a lady-in-waiting for the Lady Leenah, saying it is “such an honor” to serve her.

I’d known via her letters that she was here at the palace today, but I hadn’t imagined we’d end up meeting again like this. Maris takes my hand and leads me back to the circle of aristocrats, now in a different part of the garden. She apprises me of all the recent twists and turns in her love life (all involving *him*, of course). Lady Leenah, upon seeing how animated Maris is while talking with me, calls us over for an introduction.

“This is my dear friend Nanalie Hel. Lady Leenah, she’s the girl I’ve been telling you about.”

“Just like you’ve said, Maris! She truly is a lovely young lady.” Lady Leenah’s

long golden locks flow down her shoulders, all the way down to her waist, loose and brilliant as sunbeams on a summer's morning. Her pearlescent skin sparkles in the light of day (not just metaphorically speaking, mind you—it is *literally sparkling*), and her blue eyes are full of a gentle kindness as she smiles down upon me, patting the baby cradled in her arms all the while, rocking gently and slowly as a calm breeze. Were someone to have told me she was the Goddess incarnate, in that moment, I would have believed them.

She calls me “lovely” and I bow my head to conceal my blush. “I’m nothing compared to you,” I say, nervous. “You are many times lovelier than I could ever be.” *Should I have made comments on her appearance like that, at our first meeting...? Perhaps it was rude to reject her compliment like that...?* All my worrying is for naught, however, as her smile remains as radiant it was before I spoke.

Ms. Pidget, by the way, saw what was going on and left me behind, tossing me a quick wave before jumping on the back of her familiar and flying away.

“I apologize for keeping you like this,” Lady Leenah says, “I just simply *had* to know what kind of person it was that Maris would chase like that.” She looks down and coos at her baby, rocking it softly.

The wet nurse next to her offers to give her a break. “Your Highness,” she says, “your arms must be tired. Please, allow me.”

“Oh no,” she says, smiling and shaking her head. “I’m going to keep holding this little darling for as long as I can.”

I watch her, trying to remember how exactly she fits into the greater royal family. A conversation I recall overhearing somewhere, sometime, replays in my mind:

“This is for Sir Alois’s mother, the Duchess Norweira.”

“You are referring to Leenah?”

Huh? Hold on a second...

“Mother, please. Holding the baby for that long must greatly tire you.”

I stare at the person who walks out from behind Lady Leenah, calling her

mother, proffering his arms as a cradle for the baby.

There's something I forgot to mention: it may sound like I'm only with two other people right now, but there are actually two other acquaintances of mine here in the garden with us.

Technically speaking, they *just* walked over here, but enough time has passed for me to wonder why this morally bankrupt sexist philanderer—why *Rockmann*, wearing noble garb, is here calling this lovely lady “mother.” *And today, just like those certain other days, he's got his glasses on.*

Hold on, wait—this Lady—Duchess Norweira—is his “mother”? Isn't she too young for that? That can't be right at all. He must have meant his “older sister,” right? Not “mother”?

Despite the fact that Rockmann's just showed his loathsome face to me, *again*, I can't stop thinking about Duchess Norweira and the difference between her apparent and actual (?) age.

I suppose she does look older than Maris and I do, but I'd felt like that image of “maturity” was due more to her holding a baby rather than her looks... She's still so pretty, I can't imagine she's much older than we are. Didn't Rockmann say he had an older brother?! And three siblings in total?! This woman's already had four kids! Incredible!

In one of her recent letters, didn't Maris say that Rockmann's mother was pregnant with her fourth child?

“Did you come up to the palace today for something to do with the Wall Helenus?” Paying no mind at all to my frozen silence following Rockmann's appearance, the other acquaintance—other friend, I should say—Prince Zenon comes up and taps me on the shoulder. *Goodness, I think, what sort of occasion would make even Prince Zenon come all the way up here to the Royal Isle? Then again, the palace is like his house, or well, actually, it is his home. Of course he's here. The odd one out here is a commoner like me.*

I give him a quick nod and tell him about the orientation I just attended.

“Ah, so they got you working that?” He flashes me a smile, saying, “Do your best, alright? The whole world will be watching us. But I'm sure you'll do a good

job.”

“I will!” I say. *That’s nice of him to say. The Prince himself is counting on me!*

“Alois, Zenon! Hasten not away from me, if you will!” Immediately after Prince Zenon speaks to me, another noble young lady arrives. *Well, it’s getting a bit crowded here now... Can’t I leave?* I glance over at Maris, silently begging her permission. She gives me a stern look. *That’s a no.* With a surreptitious dart of her eyes towards the newcomer, she whispers into my ear:

“That’s my rival, you know. My rival for *Rockmann’s* love.”

“Rival”? Didn’t she mention something about this woman in her letters? In several of them, in fact? Isn’t she the princess of some country? Last week, Maris sent me a letter bemoaning the fact that Rockmann was most likely to be married off to some woman from far away for political reasons. *He’s working as a Knight, making up his own spells, and courting foreign princesses. Busy guy. Not that it has anything to do with me. The only reason I am paying the slightest bit of attention to this potential lover of his is because Maris is infatuated with Rockmann, and as her friend, I care about her feelings.*

This foreign princess is quick to offer advice to Lady Leenah as well. “Duchess Norweira, I’ve heard that the months after giving birth are a most trying period. I should indeed hope you do not push yourself too hard.”

“Oh, why thank you. Seems like I’ve been making you all worry.”

This beautiful foreign princess has wavy black hair. *Well, perhaps ‘beautiful’ isn’t quite the right word to describe her with—her eyes are wide like a child’s. ‘Cute’ fits her better, I think.* Her eyes are a pale, transparent blue, like the clearest water of the deepest lake.

She’s rolling up the sleeves on her green dress as she gracefully makes her way across the lawn to stand next to Lady Leenah. I bow my head in greeting.

From what I understand, some members of Duke Rockmann’s family are here today to present the newest addition of their family to the baby’s uncle and aunt, the King and Queen. They’re out in the palace gardens right now for some “fresh air.”

The woman in front of me is none other than Duchess Norweira Arnold

Rockmann. It's not my place to rank aristocrats, but Lady Leenah is either the number one or number two Duchess in all of Doran, depending on who you ask.

"Ah! Who might this be? A friend of Maris?" The foreign princess looks at me with curiosity in her eyes.

"Yes, ma'am," I reply, nodding.

"Just what I'd expect of you, Maris! Friends everywhere, even among the commoners! Haha!"

"Ah, my Lady," Maris interjects, "Nanalie is a classmate and friend of His Highness Prince Zenon and Sir Alois as well. There's nothing odd about her being my friend, Princess Degneah."

"Oh...ah, no, of course not. I did not mean to laugh at you, dear? I was merely jealous of the *wide* range of acquaintances you have."

There's a battle going on here. I may not be able to see it with my eyes, but when girls fight each other...this is how they do it: every word a punch, every gesture a blow. Both a bit bruised, now.

This young woman is the Princess of Vestanu, the Lady Degneah Parcer Vestanu.

Based on what I know from Maris's letters, she's here in Doran to study the arts of healing and economics from some of our scholars. She's been residing at the palace for the whole month she's been here, much to Maris's chagrin.

"Alois and Zenon do indeed have so many companions!" Princess Degneah says, "I myself should like many friends as well."

"In that case, please, allow me to invite you to the dinner party we'll be having soon," Rockmann says. "Someone of your caliber should be able to make many friends at an event like that."

"Goodness me! You honor me, good Sir. I'd very much like to attend a party at the house of the Duke!"

From what it sounds like, she'll be here in Doran for another six months. As I watch her chatter away with Prince Zenon and Rockmann, I note just how well she's established herself with the royal family. Out of the corner of my eye and

to my left, I can see Maris giving me some awful face as Princess Degneah goes on flirting with Rockmann. Maris isn't saying a word, but it's written all over her face: "hearing you speak is like biting into a *cockroach*."

Ah, young love. Setting our young lady in red aflame with passion again.

Why, exactly, this Vestanu princess is the "politically correct" match for Rockmann, I have no idea—Maris hadn't explained that in her letters. She'd written something else entirely: "*Perhaps I should just go up to her one day and declare that I am betrothed to him already! Ha! Fait accompli, indeed. Guessing she wouldn't like that. Not one bit.*"

I need to keep a close eye on Maris to make sure she doesn't do anything rash.

I'm not the only one who's noticed how unhappy Maris is. "Hey, come on Maris, don't make such an awful face. Don't wanna scare the baby."

"Oh, heavens me, Prince Zenon, whatever are you talking about? I am making no such 'face.'"

Prince Zenon, astute as ever, is quietly trying to soothe Maris's ill temper.

...and why am I here again? Standing next to all these "Sirs," "Ladies," and "Princes?" It is technically a work day for me. I really ought to be heading back to Harré and making my report to the Director as soon as possible. Ms. Pidget's already taking care of that, I'm sure, but I still need to show I haven't just abandoned my work in the middle of the day.

Step by step, I slowly edge away from the circle of nobles. Lady Leenah notices my attempt to leave, and summons me before her once more.

"Ms. Hel? Have you ever held a baby?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Lady Leenah—I mean, Duchess Norweira—has the little baby in her arms. Looking down at it, I am reminded of all the small children back in the village where I grew up. They had all felt like family to me. While I may not have had any brothers or sisters myself, I had looked after them, and the older ones had looked after me, and every day had been filled with wild, rambunctious play. *That said, I never did take care of someone else's baby.* I'd played with the

toddlers, but mostly in those instances in which the mother had been too busy taking care of their younger child. *“I’ll stay here watching the baby,”* they’d say, *“so go on and play with this one, would you?”*

“No,” I say, “I can honestly say I’ve never held one.”

If someone in my extended family had children, I might hold their babies. But unfortunately, my older cousin still hasn’t gotten married, so it doesn’t seem like I’ll have the chance for a while yet.

“Would you like to hold him?”

“Hueah?!” And there I go again: letting out a super strange sub-verbal exclamation when met with something unexpected. Did she really just ask if I wanted to hold him?

“Oh I couldn’t,” I say, firmly shaking my head from side to side. “I’ve got no experience with babies, and I really need to be going, I simply couldn’t, completely impossible—”

Despite my protests, the baby is moved closer and closer to my flustered self, and instinctively, I cradle my arms to accept it as Duchess Norweira lays it against my chest. “Hold the head like this, and put your arms like so,” she says. *Forceful and determined, just like Rockmann. Who thought I could be honored with such—oh! What a wondrous angel I have in my arms! Oooh, ahhh, it’s moving! It’s a tiny human! Oh my...*

“Don’t be your clumsy self and drop him. He’s my little brother, and I care about him, alright?” says Rockmann.

“I-I won’t drop him.”

That was rude of him. Oh, but look at this cute baby! Rockmann’s taken in by him as well. His red eyes peer through those silver frames of his down at the baby, a bemused look on his face as he watches me rock back and forth. *The last time we saw each other was back at the bar. Why’s this dummy smiling at me? I’m just trying to make the baby comfortable.*

With a *huff* I turn away from him and focus on the baby. Duchess Norweira had been standing to my right, and now she’s right in front of me. Upon seeing her shadow fall across my chest, I look up at her. “You shouldn’t look away from

the baby,” she chides me, “it’s dangerous.” I quickly look back down at the little one in my arms.

A little mystery, you are. Still cute, though. A few moments later, as I’m about to hand the baby back to Duchess Norweira, I take one more look at the baby’s face.

So warm, so small. He must get that wispy soft golden hair from his mother, and those brown eyes from his father. His skin’s just as pale as the rest of the family’s, so he’ll be just as pearlescent as the rest of them when he’s grown, no doubt.

Unexpectedly, his little eyes look at mine. *Adorable!*

“He’s so—so cute!”

“Don’t clench him against you like that. Can’t have you freezing him by accident.” Rockmann bends down to peek at the baby.

Okay, I KNOW you’re the big brother here, but I’d never do anything like that! Geez, Rockmann, could you be any more rude!

“I’m *not* gonna freeze him.”

“Oooh, scary Ice Lady. Look, he grabbed my hand. What’s wrong, little brother? This lady freaking you out?”

“I’m not freaking *anyone* out.”

“There there, put your finger near his mouth and he’ll suck on it. Look.”

“Wow! So cute.”

“Very cute.”

The baby’s sucking on Rockmann’s finger. *Surprisingly, he dotes on his little brother.* “He’s really cute, don’t you think?” he says, grinning up at me. *I’ve never seen him like this. But I guess even a sore scowler like him has got to smile when he sees a baby this cute.*

“So you said earlier you were at the management meeting for the Wall Helenus? Going to be working reception?”

“Yeah. What’s it to you?”

“Guess I’m relieved you’re going to be somewhere I can keep an eye on you.”

“What in the world do you mean by that? Won’t you be busy competing?”

“Well, sure.”

He’s gently prodding the squishy cheeks of his baby brother. “Aaa-oh!” The baby coos as he watches Rockmann’s finger move.

“Too bad you won’t win,” I say, teasing him. “Harré’s team are going to be the champions.”

“Too bad that’ll never happen,” he replies. “We do have some pride, you know. We’ll win.”

“Hmph! You better watch out. The Guild’s members are going to give you all a *thorough* beating.”

He looks up at me, incredulous. “You aren’t even competing, so where’s all this big talk coming from?”

Ah—the baby smiled! Look! That smile looks just like Duchess Norweira’s. Angelic.

Rockmann notices the smile as well. “Ice Lady here’s got a scawwy face, doesn’t she? Like some big demon.”

“Not scawwy! Golden Boy over there’s freaky, yeah?”

“Awaaa?”

Without quite thinking through what we are doing, both Rockmann and I are trying to cradle the baby at the same time. “Careful now, dear!” Princess Degneah steps beside me and holds out her arms.

“Please, allow me to hold him. You don’t mind, do you, Duchess Norweira?”

“Oh no, not at all! It would be an honor to have you hold him, Princess.”

Princess Degneah gently takes the baby into her own arms, and the instant she does so, he bursts out crying. *He’ll calm down once she starts rocking him*, I think, but he doesn’t stop his screaming.

“I just nursed him and changed his underclothes,” the wet nurse says, “I can’t understand why...”

“Oh, baby, please stop crying, okay?” Princess Degneah struggles to calm him down, singing a lullaby, cradling him just so, rocking ever so softly, even making weird faces at him, totally unlike those of a princess. *Don't give up!* Inside, I'm cheering her on, but the baby cries once more—and in that instant, a blinding burst of light erupts all around us.

“What was that? Just now?”

It had only lasted a second. I lower my hands from my face and see that Duchess Norweira's blinking rapidly in surprise at the flash. Prince Zenon shouts for the nearest guards to check the surrounding area. The baby is still crying. Princess Degneah, while distracted by the light, continues trying to calm the baby. Maris calls out, in a slightly panicked voice, “Sir Alois?” She looks to and fro, and finds him nowhere.

Where, indeed, did he go?

Maris is facing me now. “Sir Alois?” she asks.

“Um... What?” I look down. Someone's holding my right hand—there, standing next to me, is a little blond-haired boy.

Um, hello? Who are you?

“Could this be the result of a pestokraive?”

Both Princess Degneah and Maris, happy smiles on their faces, are looking curiously at the little boy holding my right hand. Duchess Norweira and Prince Zenon ask the boy several questions, none of which he answers. *Just my luck. If I knew I was going to be stuck holding hands with this...child, I would've made sure to leave the Isle right when I was supposed to.*

“Doesn't seem like he has any of his recent memories,” Prince Zenon says to me. “He's Alois, from back when he was little.”

“Little Alois.” In other words, the little blond-haired boy I am holding hands with is Rockmann. He must have changed with that flash of light.

But is this really him...? I peer down at him, trying to see the truth of the matter.

He hasn't said a word this whole time, and hasn't tried to walk over to his

mother Lady Leenah. *Despite how young he is—appears to be—and despite the fact he’s lost his memories, surely Rockmann would notice his mother standing nearby?*

Rockmann isn’t just young, however: it also seems as though he can’t let go of my hand. He’s gripping quite firmly, and were he an adult I’d fling him to the horizon, but little as he is, I gently, carefully attempt to pry my fingers out of his grasp—to no avail. *It’s like we’re stuck together with glue or something.*

The boy holding my hand looks a good deal younger than Rockmann did when I first met him. *If I had to guess, I’d say he’s four or five years old now.* His hair’s so long it stretches down to his waist, and at first glance I thought he might be a girl, but his garb is that of a male aristocrat. *He is just as Duchess Norweira and Prince Zenon judged him to be, a young boy. A young Rockmann.*

His cheeks are still round and chubby. Between the long bangs hanging over his eyes, I can see him peeking up at me. *Red eyes. That’s him alright.*

I turn to Prince Zenon. “Was he really like this as a child?”

“Yeah,” he says, “he couldn’t control his magic back then, so if I recall correctly, he was living apart from his parents. He had so much magic that things around him would break or burst into flames. Not even full-grown adult mages could control his outbursts, so he was sent to live with Dr. Aristo.”

Dr. Aristo, hm, I know him. “Sent to live,” though? Sounds like he was put into isolation. His hair’s long enough to convince me of his unusual magical ability, as well—his power must be looking for any escape it can find to get out of his body. Makes sense why his hair’s always been so long. I reflect back on my memories of Rockmann, especially that night at the masquerade. *So that’s the reason he was so friendly with Dr. Aristo—he’d lived with him once.*

I’m not quite sure how to take all of this in. He doesn’t look anything like the womanizer I know.

“Ms. Hel? If it’s alright with you, would you mind taking care of him for today?”

“Pardon?”

“He won’t let go of your hand, after all. We think he’s like that because of the

pestokraive Kees caused, so we can't just reverse it like we would with a normal spell."

"Kees" is the name of Duchess Norweira's baby. He's already back in her arms, peacefully asleep.

"Pestokraive" is the phenomenon by which magic goes explosively haywire when a young child throws a temper tantrum, and it would appear that both Prince Zenon and Duchess Norweira think that the baby's little flashy fit of light is the reason for Rockmann's transformation.

I try reversing the magic—to no effect. *Most likely, the only one who can return Rockmann to how he should be is that little baby. The likelihood of that happening seems decidedly low. It'd be absurd to march over there to little Kees and demand for him to release the spell.*

Everyone else appears to be thinking the same, brows furrowed and eyes narrowed in concentration as we try to think a way out of this situation.

Princess Degneah and Maris are both ooh-ing and aah-ing over mini-Rockmann while we discuss a potential solution. Maris perks her ears up at Duchess Norweira's words. "Are you saying Sir Alois can't go back to normal?!" *She's panicking. Of course she is. Can't exactly marry tiny Rockmann, nor expect any sort of romance with him.*

Prince Zenon walks over to me. "Nanalie, you should change your hair color to brown. It's difficult to imagine that the *adult* Alois will retain his memories of his present state, but just in case this *really* is him from the past, as in, they've *switched places in time*—change your hair color, just to be safe."

"Are you saying that if I keep my hair blue, Rockmann might remember meeting me as an adult when he was a child?"

Oh no, we can't have that. I quickly spell my hair a light brown.

"It still might happen," the Prince says, grimacing. "Not likely, though."

I tilt my head to the side, wondering. "Wouldn't it be more likely for him to have remembered all of *you* though?"

Prince Zenon looks down at mini-Rockmann, kneeling to get at eye level with

him.

“Alois,” he says, “this is a dream. This is a dream with nothing at all to do with the future. You’ll forget all this when you wake up, got it?”

Prince Zenon sounds a bit desperate in his attempts to hypnotize Rockmann. *He’s still silent, though. That’s a little worrisome, right? Just a little.* His eyes are wide and innocent—not at all like his sharp adult gaze. *I can’t act like I normally do around him. Especially if I don’t want him to remember any of this.*

Duchess Norweira seems to find this all a bit strange. “But whyever won’t he let go of your hand? It’s a baby’s pestokraive that caused it, so I don’t suppose there’s any great reason, but still...” She sighs. “You should know that at this age, Alois could cause an outburst of magic by simply opening his mouth to speak. That’s why he’s trying so hard to stay quiet, I think.”

“At this age?” I ask. *Makes sense, then, why he hasn’t said a peep. Remarkable for him to remain so silent at such a young age. I’d always figured he was flirting with every girl in sight, even as a toddler, but I suppose I was totally wrong.*

He still won’t let go of my right hand. *Well, if we must hold hands...* I give his a squeeze. *I’ll do it.*

“I’ll look after him for the rest of the day. I’ll try explaining what’s going on to the Director, but of course I’ll hide the fact that it’s Rockmann.”

Princess Degneah has a concerned look on her face as she appraises young Rockmann.

Prince Zenon tells me it’s probably best not to travel on Lala’s back if our hands are bound together, so he prepares a pegasus and carriage for us. We fly directly to Harré, trying to avoid the stares of the people below as much as possible (we’re still seen by several, however), and arrive at the Director’s office. Fortunately, she happened to be inside, and after I give her a quick explanation of the situation, she lets me take three days off. “We can’t have you gone longer than that, though,” she says, “so I’ll help you out if you still need it by then!” *That’s reassuring. At least there’s an end in sight. But three whole days! Ah! I feel so guilty.* Anxious at having basically demanded a mini-vacation from the Director, I look down at mini-Rockmann and remember

there's *another* reason to be anxious.

What am I going to do if he stays like this for three whole days?

* * * *

"Where...where is this?"

"This is my home! ...Hold on?"

With a voice as high as a young girl's, Rockmann *speaks*. I flash my eyes down to look at him.

Considering the fact that he seemed to have been isolated in some facility for most of his childhood, at first I'd thought it'd be nice for us to spend a day out in town, seeing the sights, but then I remembered *that* particular idea could end quite badly if we met someone he knew. I'd wanted to avoid him seeing anyone he'd recognize. In the end, I'd decided to play along with Prince Zenon's idea, telling him that this was "all just a dream," and resolving to spend the day in my dorm room. We've just now walked through the door when he finally speaks.

The dorm mother, by the way, had let him come inside with the flimsiest of excuses: "One of my relatives asked me to look after their kid!" *Would she refuse a real criminal from coming inside...?*

"Hey la-dy, you gonna drain my po-wer?"

"Drain your power?"

"I won't break an-y-thing, but, you gonna drain my po-wer?"

I look down at my right hand holding fast to his. Rockmann's looking there as well—*his left, I suppose*. His long eyelashes blink up and down as he stares questioningly up at me. *Aw, isn't he cute! That's cheating you know, giving me those baby eyes like that. Not that I'm ever going to tell him he was cute as a child.*

Just to be safe, I'd changed the arrangement of my furniture and my wallpaper. Adult Rockmann's been to this room once before, so I wanted to make sure that mini-Rockmann saw something different when he walked through the door. *Not that we can really be sure he'll remember any of this*

when he goes back to normal. Nothing better than being careful, though.

“La-dy,” he says, “you doc-tor’s a-ssis-tant?”

“Dr. Aristo’s assistant? No, I’m not. You were lost, so I helped you.”

“I was lost?”

“Then, someone played a prank on us, so we have to hold hands. Sorry about that.”

He asks question after question, his earlier silence gone like a distant memory. He asks me things like “where are we,” “who are you, lady,” “is it fun being outside,” and so on and so forth. It’d be dangerous of me to reply honestly to all of those questions, so I leave it vague, without any great sense that he’s satisfied with my answers. With regards to the question of “who am I,” I tell him I’m “someone in the Knight’s Order who’s in charge of finding all the lost little children,” a complete and utter lie. *I hate lying, but in times like these, there certainly is a need to do so.*

I’d chosen the Knight’s Order as my “workplace” because then it wouldn’t have seemed odd for us to have been up on the Royal Isle—but in all probability I’d overthought the matter. *A little kid like this isn’t going to try piecing things together that much.*

Then again, this child is Rockmann, of all people.

Much different from how I spent my days as a child, playing in the mud with the neighbor kids, this little guy’s probably sharper than average. I catch myself as I compare child Rockmann’s intelligence with my own as a child. *Good grief, Nanalie, can’t you give it a rest for once? Not everything in life is a competition.*

Child Rockmann doesn’t seem to remember much from before he appeared on the Royal Isle. I try asking him where he was before he got lost, but all he does is frown and “hmmm” to himself. “I don’t know.”

No point in forcing him to remember. He’s not talking much about himself, though, that’s for certain.

“I wa-nna eat can-dy. I wa-nna play.” For better or worse, everything that comes within his field of vision seems to inspire some new desire to do

something.

Eventually, the topic of Dr. Aristo comes up. He smiles and his eyes light up as he tells me the Doctor “doe-sn’t like that” or “he likes this,” and so on.

Duchess Norweira told me he couldn’t speak for very long without his magic going out of control. He may not be “fluent,” precisely, but we are having a conversation. Bit anticlimactic, really. He’s an alright kid after all.

Then, voices and footsteps at the door. *Knock knock.*

“Nanalie? I heard that you’re looking after the child of one of your relatives?”

“Miss Nanalie! Would you like to have dinner with us?”

Not good.

Child Rockmann looks up at me. “Na-na-lie...?”

“Oh, no, Nanannana—Naijeiri! I’m *Naijeiri*! That’s my name!”

Who the heck is “Naijeiri”?

Berating myself for picking such an unlikely name, I wipe away beads of a cold sweat on my forehead. “Coming!” I shout towards the door. “Naijeiri is home, and she is coming!” Still holding Rockmann’s hand in my right, we approach the door. I open it, just a crack, to see my colleague’s confused faces.

Zozo breaks the silence. “Who in the world is ‘Naijeiri’?”

“Oh, we’re just playing a little game... Anyway, my relative’s kid is feeling a bit ill, so I’m thinking we’ll just spend the night in here.

Cheena can’t keep herself from looking crestfallen. “Is that so? That’s too bad, I really wanted to see the kid...”

“I’m really sorry. H-Hey!”

Child Rockmann must’ve gotten curious about who these people were, because now he’s trying to dart between my legs out the door—while still holding my right hand. I gently but firmly press my legs together and try to ignore the ticklish sensation of him pushing up against my knees. I smile at the two of them, nod my head, and slowly close the door as they leave.

Earlier, I’d thought about taking a bath, but now I don’t have the energy for

that. *I'll just spell away all the dirt and grime off both myself and Rockmann.* I twirl a finger on my left hand, and a warm wind envelops the two of us. Rockmann's long golden hair flies up into the air, then back down.

"Nice ma-gic!" Rockmann grins up at me.

"Thanks."

"I can't...do ma-gic."

He can't do magic?

Little Rockmann is despondent as he explains to me he can't perform magic without causing something to explode. "Grand-fa-ther told me..." he pauses, obviously sad. "I am 'de-fec-tive'."

Goddess above. Who goes around telling children that they're "defective"? Moreover, what kind of child can remember and say the word "defective"? Sounds like Rockmann had a more complicated, or rather, troubled childhood than I thought.

I sit down in front of him and lean in close, looking deep into Little Rockmann's bright red eyes. "In the future," I say, "you will be an *awesome* mage! I guarantee it!"

"But—"

"You will use more magic than I do, more than *anyone* does, and you'll be super popular with the girls!"

For some reason, I'm getting a little intense as I try to cheer him up.

"I hope...that really does happen," he whispers.

"It will!" I say, giving him a little pat on the head. *That's no lie.*

A while later he tells me he's hungry. *I've only got one hand available, but I can still make a little snack.*

Rockmann accompanies me around the room as I prepare the food. Child Rockmann's head doesn't even come up to my waist, so he has to stay quite close. He's completely absorbed in watching me as I cook. *As an aristocrat, he'd never see someone preparing food.* As I knead the dough with one hand for the

porka pastry I'm about to bake, his eyes are sparkling with interest. *Ah! There he goes, being cute again!* I smile to myself. *I'm going to carry that thought to the grave.*

I bake the pastry, we say grace, and both of us eat. *Eh. It's alright. Not bad for having made it with one hand.*

Little Rockmann has a big smile on his face as he stuffs bits and pieces of pastry into his mouth, munching. "Yummy," he says. His expression is the exact same as the one he'd had on when he'd been prodding the baby's cheeks, all grins and smiles.

"You," I mutter, "why did you challenge me to a game back then?"

"Let's play a game."

Those were the first words that he had said to me when we'd met back in that classroom. It was no exaggeration to say that those words had framed our whole relationship since then.

"Rock-paper-scissors."

"Pardon?"

If he hadn't said those words to me—if he'd said something even only slightly different—I wonder, could we have become good friends by now? I look at the sincere Little Rockmann sitting in front of me. *Damned I'll be if I'm arrogant enough to deem a fancy aristocrat boy a "friend," though.*

"Hey, la-dy."

"What?"

"Will you, stay with me, until I get big?"

He squeezes my right hand. His little fingers are small, but they've got some strength in them.

"The whole time? I don't know about that."

Anymore than three days, boy, and I might be out of a job.

"No!"

"Hm?"

"I want you to stay," he huffs, puffing out his cheeks in a great pout.

He's been separated from his family all this while. I suppose it's only natural that he feel some sense of safety upon meeting a new adult he can trust.

"In a little while," I say, "you'll go back to Dr. Aristo's house." He doesn't stop pouting. *Oh dear.* "Um, hmm..." I think, looking around the room. "Let's play a game. If you win, I'll stay." *Spineless, Nanalie, spineless! Giving into his cuteness like that? What are you thinking?*

"A game?"

Here I am, a full grown adult, attempting to compete with a child. Real mature. It's all because I remembered what he said to me when we met. I shouldn't have let that slip out, though—what am I going to do if I lose? I let out a sigh. *I've done it now. Guess I've got to take responsibility for my words and see this through.*

"Um, hold your hands like this."

"This?"

He doesn't know the rules of rock-paper-scissors, so after a brief tutorial, we prepare for the real deal. "Just one match," I say. "Ready, go!"

"Rock, paper—"

"—scissors!"

I, who'd challenged a child to a contest I could not *possibly* lose against my will, had successfully beat Little Rockmann in our game of rock-paper-scissors.

Excellent. We're okay. Wait, what's "okay" about this?

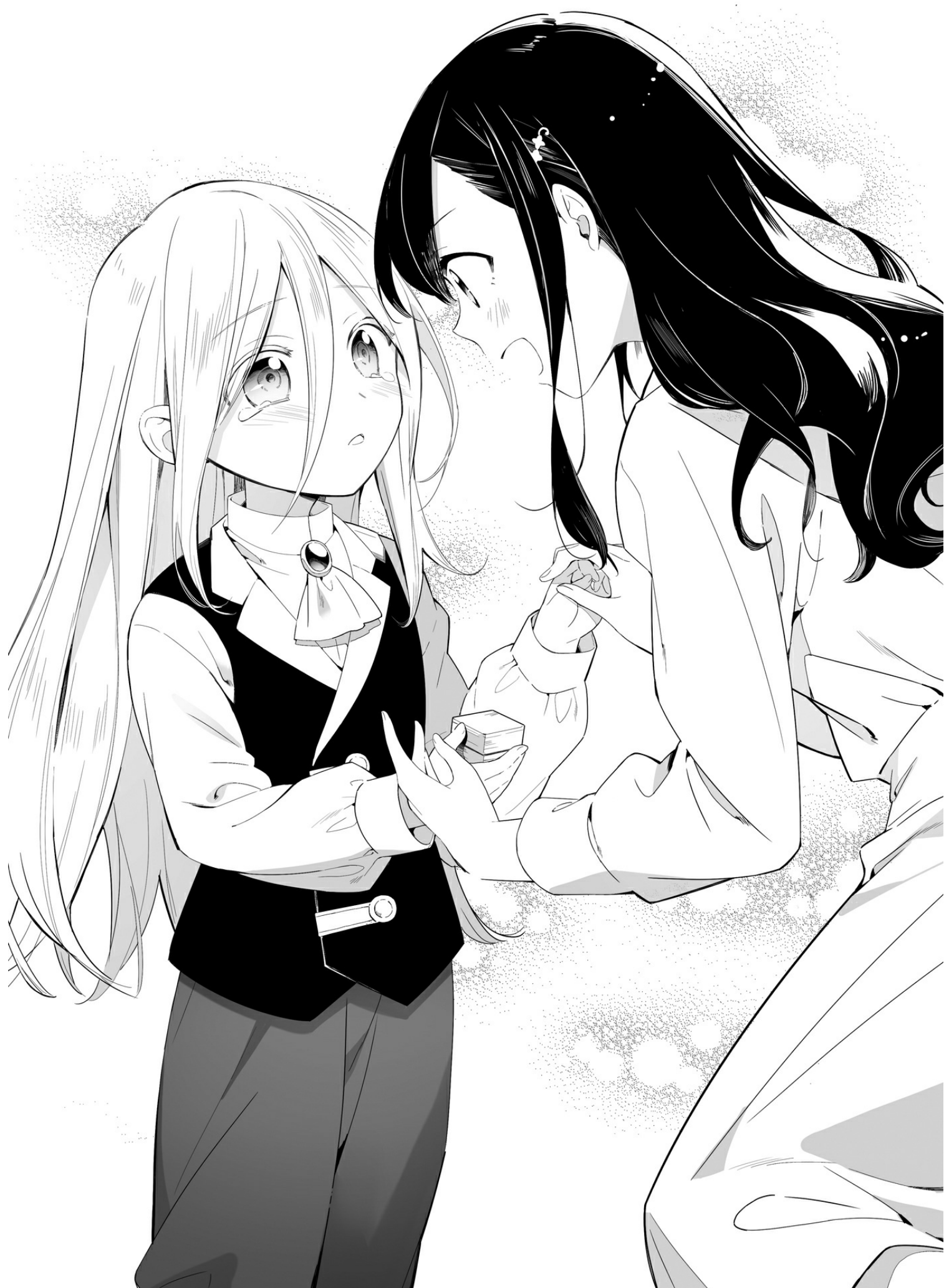
"N-No? You won't...stay with me?" Little Rockmann's tearing up. With one tiny *hiccup*, he starts crying uncontrollably.

Ah! This was not my intention! Not my intention at all! Here was Rockmann, young and in the middle of going through the most lonely period of his life, and I had taught him to make promises that couldn't be kept over games of chance. *What kind of lesson did I just teach him?!*

"Hold on!" I say, grabbing his head with my left hand and making him look at

me. Out of surprise, he blinks several times, forgetting to cry. I reach over to pluck a tiny green box off the windowsill.

“This is my box,” I say holding it out to him. “Never, ever, open it.”



He takes it into his little hand and clenches it tightly.

“I don’t really believe in fortune telling or good-luck charms, but maybe...”

This charm box was given to me by the Director right before Rockmann had headed out on his investigation of the Land of the Sea. Supposedly we’d meet again if we both didn’t open our boxes (not that I needed the Director interfering with my relationship with Rockmann like that). Rockmann had opened the freaking box right then and there, but I, who’d thought I’d be rather inconvenienced if I never met him again (I still hadn’t beat him at anything), had decided not to open it, and left it closed over in the corner of my apartment.

“If you always keep this lid closed,” I tell him, “then maybe, certainly, even if you don’t want to, we’ll meet again, I think.

“We’ll start fighting all the time the moment we see each other,” I continue.

“I’m sure I’ll freeze your arms.

“I’m sure you’ll burn my hair.

“But I won’t freeze you solid, and you won’t burn me to ash.

“It’ll go on like that, for years and decades.

“We’ll be rickety old geezers, squabbling to the end of our days.

“At some point, we’ll have both realized that we’ve gotten older, together.”

Tear-filled eyes are looking up at me.

“We will not be siblings, not friends, not even lovers. But you and I will *always* be connected. It’s not that lonely if you think about it that way, is it? Here, here’s my box. It’s yours.” I pat the top of his little head with my left hand.

“Don’t cry.”

Whether he’s relieved at my reassurances or just tired of crying—either way, he rubs away his tears, and I decide it’s time we busy ourselves making dinner and then turning in for an early sleep. Unfortunately, I don’t have any child-sized pajamas, so I make him wear just a shirt of mine, loose and baggy as it is on him. I still can’t let go of his hand, so I just spell our pajamas on both of us.

He sets aside the box on the edge of the table while we eat dinner, but the

moment we finish, he's holding it again in his right hand. I tell him to set it aside before bed because he won't be able to sleep well while holding on to it, but he groans "no!" so I just stop trying to take it away from him. *Doesn't seem like he intends to let it leave his grasp for a moment. Well, at least he's stopped crying. Must admit, I do feel embarrassed about getting his hopes up about meeting future—past?—me. Guilty, too.*

Rockmann lays on his side, facing me, holding the box to his chest.

"Good night," I whisper. He closes his eyes, and I watch him carefully until I hear him snoring softly. I lay back against my pillow, looking up at the ceiling. Every once in a while, though, I glance over to check on the child next to me, still unable to fully process that this is actually *him*.

I watch him, young and quiet and sound asleep. *How can I be sure that the one "dreaming" here isn't actually me...?* My head spins at the thought.

He looks so peaceful when he's asleep. Not that I need to know what he looks like when he sleeps.

Not that I need to know anything about him at all.

I recall the events of the day, turning them over and over in my head, trying to understand *why* this happened the way it did—but the night only grows deeper, and I think of no answers. *I think it's about time I went to sleep as well.*

And so I did.

The next morning.

"Nnnnnghhh..."

A trill of birdsong drifts through the window. The sound pulls me out of a dream. *Ah. Morning already?* I slowly open my eyes, stretch out my arms... *Hold on, why isn't my hand moving?* Still in bed and lying on my left side, I look down at my arm resting across my waist.

A lot happened with Little Rockmann yesterday...right? Didn't we end up falling asleep holding hands?

I hold out my right hand and wave it around a little bit, honestly surprised. There's no little hand gripping my right anymore. *Huh? Where'd Little*

Rockmann go?

But more importantly, what's holding me so tightly from behind? It feels like vines are wrapped around me, keeping me in place... Who is holding me? A thick, muscular arm is wrapped around my torso, brushing against the underside of my breasts.

"...An arm?"

For a while, I think. Just before bed—didn't I think something along the lines of "whatever happens, happens?"

Maybe I jinxed myself with that into some awful situation, some "whatever."

Also, my right hand isn't holding his anymore. We're not stuck together at all... I think.

I pause. What happened to Little Rockmann?

The arm draped over me is *clearly* not that of a child's. I'm the type of person who doesn't find it easy to wake up in the morning, and so my mind is still a bit muddled with drowsiness. *If some intruder's broken into my room and is lying in bed with me, I'll restrain them with a spell and force them to tell me why they're here.* Resolute, I turn over to face the other occupant of my bed.

"Wha—"

Boards. There are *boards* filling my field of vision. They aren't just boards, they're *warm* boards. *Hold on a second—these are, you know that, big and firm chest muscles. Not a woman's chest. That's what I'm seeing.* The chest muscles are loosely covered by a soft black men's dress vest. From around the collar I can see the well-defined muscles of a man's neck. My eyes drift further up his body to see a wash of golden hair covering his face. Then there's that aroma he has about him. *I've smelled this before. It was back at the graduation party, when he was much closer to me than he'd ever been before.* It isn't cologne, exactly, but more like how the sun smells on a fresh summer's morning.

It is at this moment that I learn that when humans are *truly* shocked about something, they are unable to make any sound at all.

The man holding me in his arms is neither a child nor an intruder, but an adult

who had been missing for half of yesterday: Rockmann. He's become an adult again, or rather, he's *back* to being an adult.

It's him.

Wait a minute, how did this happen? What happened to Little Rockmann? Is he really back to normal now? Someone, wake this guy up and ask him.

On second thought, no, don't wake him up. I need to think.

My gaze traces his well-defined jawline, his sharp nose. His eyelashes are as crazy long as ever, and his lips, while thin, have a full, healthy color. When I'd met his father, I'd noted how they didn't look much alike. *Now that I've met his mother, however, I can really see her features reflected in his.* The expression on his face, somehow, doesn't look much changed from how he'd looked as a sleeping child—peaceful, untroubled. *Well, they are the same person, so I suppose that makes sense.*

It really pisses me off how handsome this guy is.

He doesn't at all look like he's about to wake up. *Can a Knight really allow himself to sleep so soundly? What if I suddenly felt the urge to attack him right now? You'd be dead, Rockmann, I'll have you know.*

The problem I need to solve, however, is not how to wake him up—it's how to explain this whole situation we're in. It's still a total mystery as to *how* he managed to turn back into normal, but since it had happened, I decide it isn't something I need to worry over further.

"Wa-hey!"

As I'm stuck wondering what I'm going to say, he pulls me in close against him. He hasn't woken up yet, it seems like he's just reflexively holding me tighter while still asleep. *Why?! Little Rockmann didn't so much as turn over in his sleep, but apparently Adult Rockmann holds on tight to anyone sleeping next to him! And not gently, either! I feel like he's going to squeeze the air right out of my lungs...!*

My face is now uncomfortably close to the base of his neck. *I'm left with no choice.* I wriggle a bit to get some space, gasp in a futile attempt at taking a deep breath and, finally, scream in his ear.

“WAKE UP YOU PERVERT!”

“What’s that *awful* racket?”

“You’re holding me so tight I can barely breathe! Let me go!”

“Huh?”

His voice is low, a man’s voice, completely unlike the high-pitched voice he’d had as a child.

Rockmann, who’s now finally opened his eyes, lifts his head up from the pillow, blinks a few times, and looks down at me in his arms. He looks at me closely. His bangs catch the light of the morning sun as they fall to rest on his cheek.

After a while, he breathes in a quiet *gasp* of recognition, twists his face up into an expression of grim seriousness—then firmly pushes his head back down on the pillow.

“I’m not awake yet.”

Not awake yet? Look at this guy! He’s got one arm over his face, covering his eyes, like he’s trying to go back to sleep! This isn’t your bed, dummy! Rise and shine!

“What,” I ask, “are you saying? Of course you’re awake.”

“No, this is a memory—?”

He quickly lifts his arm off his face to look at me again. This time, it looks like he’s really awake—his eyes are clear, and I can almost *hear* him thinking. For a while, he’s completely frozen, his gaze locked with mine. *Yep: when humans are truly shocked about something, they can’t make any sound at all.*

Finally, he speaks. “Have you...kidnapped me?”

Who the heck would want to kidnap a knave like you?

“As if I’d ever do that!”

I’d really rather have him let me go right this instant, but he’s probably confused about what’s going on... I ought to give him an explanation. I sigh. I’m not being nicer to him because he was cute and polite as a child, though. No,

that's definitely not the reason why I'm doing this for him.

I tell him that his baby brother had a pestokraive back at the palace and placed him under a spell. A spell that caused him to lose consciousness, and made me unable to let go of his hand. Left with no choice, I tell him, I dragged him all the way back to my dorm room, and, *most unwillingly*, into my bed, upon which I promptly fell asleep.

Rockmann reacts not in the slightest to this simple (false) explanation of the situation. Not a hint of surprise or so much as a “hmmm” of suspicion. He just lies there, on my bed, looking around my room, with a totally bored expression on his face.

Get. Your. Hands. Off. Me! Right as I'm about to freeze his arms—which are still wrapped around me—he points towards the windows and mumbles.

“Did you remodel this place or something?”

“Ah! N-N-N-No! It's not like that!”

“Not like what?” he likely thinks, as I shove him back down into the pillows and twirl a finger on my right hand to put all my furniture, windows, and wallpaper back to normal. *That was close!* My heart beats fast as I realize just how bad that could have been. *Why is it that when Rockmann's around, I'm always given some heart-pounding trauma to live through? He's gonna give me a heart attack, one of these days...*

“Ow?” Rockmann must've hit the bed frame when I shoved him. He's rubbing the back of his head and giving me a little scowl. *Not important. What's important is:*

“You don't remember how you got here, right?”

“At the very least, I don't understand how I ended up in this room.”

“Well, good.”

“Good?”

“Don't worry about it.”

He's acting like his normal self again, which puts me at ease. *Little Rockmann had smiled more widely and often than adult Rockmann does, but something*

about that child's smile had been fragile, pained. As if it would shatter at the slightest touch. There's nothing fragile about adult Rockmann.

How he got to be the way he is now, however, remains a mystery. *What kind of experiences did he go through that changed him from that delicate, uncertain child to the sharp, smooth operator he is now? A flatterer might say that he's the perfect man, who looks as though he's never once struggled to do anything in life.*

I don't ask him questions about his memories as a child. All I'd told him was that he'd been "unconscious" while stuck holding my hand—if I start asking him random questions about his childhood, he's *sure* to suspect something more happened. *He's too perceptive for me to let my guard down. I have to remember what I told him, and convince him it's the truth.*

Anyhow, I'm glad I managed to get this sorted without taking a full three days off of work. It's not yet time for the morning shift to start... I'll head over and tell the Director first thing at the shift change. She'd been planning to tell me more about my night shift duties. It'd be irritating to finally be considered ready for that—a promotion, more responsibility—only to fall flat on my face by getting involved in some trouble with Rockmann.

Rockmann continues staring around at my room. He doesn't seem like he's about to get up out of my bed anytime soon.

"You're awake. We're no longer stuck holding hands. Get the heck out of my room!"

He acts like he hears not a word of what I say, merely looking around the room, very carefully.

Pampered prick, is a commoner's room that interesting? Wait, that was a yawn just now. Maybe he's just sleepy. I'd really like to throw him right out the room with a carefully calibrated spell, but we both just woke up, so I refrain from doing so. *How horrible would I be if I did that, anyway? I drag him all the way in here, for reasons totally unknown to him, then throw him out the window the instant he wakes up? I'd feel guilty for doing so, even if it is him. I suppose I should at least give him breakfast before showing him the door.*

But why do I have to make him breakfast? Aren't I the one being

inconvenienced here?

The porka pastries left over from last night are sitting out on the kitchen table.

“I think I get it now.”

Porka pastries use portokali fruit, so they don’t last long once they’re made. *I should’ve put them into the foodbox.* Right as I’m getting off my bed to do so, however, Rockmann starts laughing and saying things like “I get it.”

“So it *was* you,” he says. “Haha!” He laughs so hard he wraps his arm around his stomach, curling up into a ball of mirth. My heart pounds a little harder at the sight of that wide grin on his face, but I have *no* idea what he finds so funny.

His red eyes narrow as he looks over at me.

“Was I really just unconscious?”

“Y-Yeah, you were...”

“Rockmann” was not, technically, conscious after the pestokraive yesterday, so I’m not lying. He wasn’t *just* not conscious, however. Casually, carelessly, he sits up, cross-legged on my bed, and tilts his head to one side as he watches my expression.

Not good. Let’s move this right along, shall we? “W-Would you like some breakfast?!” I leap out of bed and immediately start preparing food. A few heartbeats of silence pass. I look back to see him staring at me, dumbfounded.

“Well?”

“Oh, uh, sure...”

I realize while I’m sautéing the vegetables that I might have just created *more* opportunities for him to ask prying questions by inviting him to eat breakfast with me. *It was reckless to offer, Nanalie, reckless. You really ought to think these things through!*

But once he’s eaten, I’ll have him go home. If I eat quickly and look like I’m busy getting ready, I doubt he’ll go out of his way to broach that topic again before leaving. Yeah. Definitely.

“Mind if I read this?”

“Go right ahead.”

He’s polite, in the way he asks to read the mystery novel by Piring lying on my desk, carefully picks it up, and sits down at the kitchen table, puts on his glasses, and begins to read, quiet and contained. *Am I the only one who’s freaking out about how weird this whole situation is?!* I feel something like frustration as I watch him sit there, calm as can be, while my heart pounds with anxiety.

I don’t want to feel frustration outside of a competition. I hate this feeling of defeat, like by losing my composure here, I’ve lost something greater...

I turn away from him, shaking my head. *Breakfast is ready. Let’s get it all set out on the table.* I pull out some plates for the food. *Hmm. I suppose I should offer him something to drink as well.*

“What would you like to drink?”

He asks for, of course, some fancy royal beverage I’ve never heard of: “Rakiyan Dengul Tea.”

“As if I have any of that!” I huff, sent into a tizzy of irritation.

“Ooooh, scary,” he says, rolling his eyes and covering his face with the book.

Gah! I’ll show you!

I pull out some random bag of tea, stick it in a cup of boiling hot water, and place it in front of him. He takes a sip, nonchalant.

I’m crestfallen by his non-reaction. *And here I was, thinking I’d be able to burn that sharp tongue of his... Just how many times am I going to lose to him this morning?*

“Here you are,” I say, laying his plate of food down in front of him before sitting across the table. “Let’s eat.”

I begin eating my breakfast as quickly as possible. Rockmann, apparently unable to complain about the food I’ve given him, makes small talk as we eat, asking me things like “Did you make all this yourself?” and “Do you have work today?” I humor him with short replies. We have this *ridiculous* conversation,

and I'm a bit deflated by how *normal* it all sounds. *It kind of reminds me of the types of conversations my parents would have over breakfast, back when I was a kid...*

Just what is going on here?

"Hel, you've got something on your face."

"Ah, oh no..."

"Not that side. This side. If you didn't eat so quickly, you wouldn't... No, not that side, the other."

Rockmann stretches his arm across the table to wipe away a crumb clinging to my cheek.

I want to slap away his hand for his overly-familiar manner, but my body simply refuses to listen to anything my mind tries to tell it. I'm frozen.

Stop that. I can do that myself. I'm not a child.

Now that I think about it—this guy's always been like this, hasn't he? Despite the fact that he sure likes to make rude and nasty comments, from time to time, he does do this thing where he goes out of his way to help other people, sometimes too much so.

Back when we'd been in school, we'd have these independent study periods when we just worked on written assignments the teacher had given us. I'd be sitting next to him at our desk, writing my answers, and he'd peek over at my paper and point out all my mistakes. I'd been pretty pissed that he felt he could just look at my answers without even *asking*, but there was another way of thinking about what he'd done—he'd gone out of his way to correct the mistakes of the student next to him, despite the fact they fought constantly.

I hadn't interpreted his actions as *teaching* me how to find the right answers, but looking back on that period as an adult, I realize that was really what he was doing. *Ugh. This feels like that again. It feels like defeat.*

Anyway, we're done eating. Time to kick him out. I raise my hands in a *shoo-*ing gesture to get him getting on, but his sincere, friendly smile and compliment of "that was delicious" stops me in my tracks.

Ah! My heart's pounding again—and it feels hard to breathe. Am I ill? Have I developed some heart defect? I'll have to go see Dr. Petros sometime soon so he can take a look.

I'm standing completely still, staring ahead as I think through all this. He waves his hand in front of my glassy gaze—so I freeze it. He tries burning my hair off in return.

As the steam from our tussle dissipates, he says, "I'll be going, now."

"I'm very glad to hear that," I say, smiling wide. Then I open the window.

"What's with the window?"

"Oh, that's how you're leaving. This is a girl's dorm, after all."

"Ah. That's right," he nods. *Quick on the uptake. At least he's got that going for him.*

He summons Yuuri inside the room, makes him hover right outside the window, and hangs one leg over his back as he crosses over the threshold of the windowsill. *Jeez, those long legs of his make me mad! Go jump out a window, Rockmann.*

"Oh, I almost forgot—" He looks back at me. *Just get out!*

"I've told you this before, but you can't say that you're 'in disguise' if all you're doing is changing the color of your hair." He lightly places a hand over his mouth as he smirks.

"Don't you laugh at me!" *Wait—I forgot to change my hair back to it's normal color.* "I just—I just wanted to change things up! I like this color, once in a while!" I frown at him, pouting a little. "I-I'm not trying to 'disguise' myself, or anything..."

It's always like this. Right when I'm about to start thinking of him as just-a-tiny-bit-of-a-good guy, he teases me. Maybe he doesn't want me to think of him as a good guy.

The real question here is: do I want to think of him as a good guy?

Why can't I just think of him like I always do? Maddening and exasperating, now and always.

He gives me a little salute of farewell. “Right then, see you around at the Wall Helenus.”

“Yeah, see you...huh? No! Not around! Wrong! Around? Around what? What’s wrong?”

“...You seem pretty good at entertaining yourself.” He watches me like one would watch a strange beast growling in the wild. “Anyways, later...”

“Yes! Later! Whatever! Hurry up and get gone!”

As he jumps on Yuuri’s back, I slam the windows shut and stick out my tongue at him.

After he leaves, I decide to do a little cleaning up. I search for the little clothes Child Rockmann was wearing last night, along with the little box that should be somewhere on the bed.

“Huh? That’s weird...”

I look all over my room, but I can’t find the little box anywhere. *Did Little Rockmann actually take it “back” with him? ...No, that’s absurd. But what about those clothes he changed out of before bed? That expensive-looking outfit’s gone too...with him? No way.*

A few days later, I received a polite letter of gratitude from Prince Zenon.

“Thanks for taking care of Alois. Maris and the Princess are happy he’s back to normal. I made my story of what happened match what you told him, so don’t worry about him suspecting anything.”

At least I don’t have to think about that anymore. I fold up the letter and slip it inside my desk drawer.

“Now then, time to be off to Harré.”

People are not simply their occupations. They are—they *need*—all of the everyday occurrences and chance encounters they have before, after, and yes, *during* work; all of those *slices of life* come together to make up who they are.

That said, I don’t want another breakfast with Rockmann. Not until every star falls and all mountains are blown to dust. That constant sense of defeat I had this morning—horrible way to wake up.

Just you wait, Rockmann. One day, I will beat you at something, and the whole world will be watching to see me do it.

And so the year came to an end. I was finally entrusted with all the responsibilities of working the night shift. *This year is my year*, I thought. *Working hard in both my magic studies and at my job, I shall become unbeatable.*

The Council of Kings and the Knights' Round Table

In the Kingdom of Vestanu, in a room of Castle Bahtzen:

“Let us begin the final Council for the Wall Helenus.”

Every inch of the room is glimmering with light. The expansive room is carpeted with the furs of silver wolves, illuminated by the subtle scarlet glow cast by the fine glass lamps hanging from the walls and ceiling. In the center of the room, a massive table has been fashioned from thousands of pale sapphires, bound together with magic to form a smooth circle, around which twenty silver thrones are arranged.

The ornamental engravings on each throne differ, with one bearing the image of a fierce lion and another with a flower in full bloom carved deep into its back. The unique engravings are all vivid and artfully done, fitting designs for the seats of kings. In each seat sits a royal, anticipating the discussion to come.

One King, with deep lines on his face and a thick, black beard, surveyed the rest. He is the King of Vestanu, and he sits on the Lion Throne. He interlaces the fingers of both hands as he leans forward to rest his elbows on the table.

“King Doran,” he says, “as the host for the upcoming tournament, have you words of wisdom to share with the rest of us?”

The King of Vestanu, Malifa, is the host of this Council of Kings, this *Bacches*. He’s addressing the King of Doran, Zerolight, who sits on the Flower Throne.

“We have said all that needs saying. The day after tomorrow, it begins.”

Zerolight speaks in a relatively loud voice, as if he is attempting to lift the mood of the gloomy chamber, as if he were attempting to encourage himself. He needs encouraging, for he feels about to sigh with exasperation at the thought of a prolonged absence from his wife the Queen Consort, and his children the Princes and Princess. To distract himself, he rubs his thumb against the cold metal of the throne’s armrests.

Doran may indeed be the “Kingdom of Flowers,” but could something not be

done about this feminine engraving? I am a King, not a Queen. He glares reproachfully over at Malifa. *I am sure he prepared this design especially for me.*

The two of them are participating in a Council of Kings, a *Bacches*, held to celebrate and affirm the friendship of neighboring countries at a place for cordial conversation.

Invitations for Council meetings are usually sent out once every month or two, but in the past half year they had been meeting twice a month, a rather high frequency for these sorts of attendees.

Vestanu has been hosting the Council meetings for half a year. Before that, the host had been the Principality of Haruluku, a realm in the northwest of the continent.

Between the Principality of Haruluku and the neighboring Kingdoms of Doran and Vestanu lie six other countries. As it is close to neither, normally there would be little interaction between people of Haruluku and the thrones of Flower and Lion.

What Haruluku's presence at this meeting means, then, is that while this Council had originally been a meeting of the Kings of neighboring countries, it had at some point expanded to include every King on the continent for intensive discussions on wide-ranging issues.

King Zerolight had never predicted it would get this big, back at the beginning of it all. Well, perhaps he *had* predicted it, but even so, he is unable to hold back a troubled sigh of worry as he thinks of the problem before him.

Within his Kingdom, demons are growing more numerous. Other Kings around the table might wish to cancel the tournament, but all felt unable to do so. That mysterious demon, the Devil that never failed to utter the name *Städal*, had appeared in other places all over the continent.

There are, of course, mountains of other issues they might discuss, but it is *this* problem, this *demon issue*, that has demanded their deliberation and a decision on what must be done. It has demanded that they fulfill their duties as sovereigns sworn to protect their realms.

In two days' time, the Wall Helenus will begin. The Kings all are concerned

about the tournament itself, and what might happen there. The Devil had, up until now, limited itself to appearing before gatherings of aristocrats and their Kings. But at this Wall Helenus, as had been the custom at all the previous tournaments, Kings and aristocrats from all over the continent would be gathered together in one location. Might the Devil make an appearance before them all, revealing itself to the common folk watching the competition?

All of them know the likeliest answer to this question.

From the Serpent Throne, engraved with the image of the snake god Opis, the youthful King of Orcinus speaks up. "Perhaps we should be thinking of this differently. There may be an attack on the tournament, but there will also be a large number of mages there. Surely the competitors, our strongest and fiercest magic wielders, shall prove more than a match for this Devil." His voice, young and strong, sounds high and clear in the lamplit chamber. Despite his age, he speaks with the same confidence of his elders.

Given their involvement in the Orcinus Operation, Zerolight, Malifa, and the King of Sheera all take the Orcinus King's words somewhat differently from their peer Kings. They look at him carefully to discern his intentions, their attention drawn by his apparent confidence. The current matter of discussion has a great deal to do with Orcinus. All of them must be careful in both how they speak and how they act.

The reason all of them are gathered together like this is, of course, due to the appearance of the strange demon, the Devil, in each of their countries.

It had begun with the inland countries. Once realms as far off as the Principality of Haruluku made known the presence of the Devil within their domains, however, it had been thought better for all of them to come together as one to jointly deal with the problem. The Devil had, however, caused almost no practical damage to anyone or anything, and had merely shown up to terrorize and threaten all those who saw it. That being said, there was no denying the fact that the number of demon sightings had been rising all across the continent. They absolutely could not let their guard down.

Doran had decided to send envoys to each of the continent's twenty realms so that they could be gathered here today for this meeting.

“Were we to suddenly cancel the tournament, the common folk would only grow more uneasy.”

“Were we to expect our competitors to fight demons at the risk of their own lives, I’m sure *they* would grow uneasy. We must let them know. If we keep this Devil secret from the world, we shall surely lose a great deal of commoners when it comes to light. We stand to lose their trust, or worse.”

“Then there’s that other news, about the new continent that was discovered—with more than half of the animals consisting of demons and their ilk. There are far more demons in the world than we had previously imagined. The peoples of the continent *must* be made aware of their existence.”

“Should we reveal all this at once, why, we’d have a mass panic.”

“—Ahem.”

One of their number clears his throat to draw the attention of the other Kings, interrupting their tense exchange.

“I shall make an announcement at the opening ceremonies.”

Zerolight clears his throat once more.

“I shall inform the public of the current situation. I shall describe the increase in demonic activity and the accompanying dangers, as well as emphasizing *why* it is necessary that we hold this tournament in such circumstances: to unite all our realms against a common foe.”

* * * *

“The Knights of Vestanu have arrived.”

“Prince Zenon, Sir Grove—my apologies for our tardiness.”

Zenon and Grove look up at the man who sits astride a phoenix, both a little out of breath from their landing. The man is none other than Sarenja Borizurie, a Knight of Vestanu. He climbs down from his blue phoenix’s back, plants his feet on the ground, and turns to greet them.

He has ochre-colored hair and a clean-cut visage, and is wearing the close-fitting, green uniform befitting a Knight from Vestanu. The uniform makes his legs look even longer as he steps lightly alongside them, heading towards the

Order's fortress. His walk is that of a man who's been here many times before, for he does not falter or wander in his stride across the grassy landing area.

Zenon walks at the head of their little group, with Borizurie careful to remain a step or two behind and to the right of the Prince. On Zenon's left walks Grove, who begins speaking of what needs to be discussed at the Round Table today. Both Zenon and Borizurie look most serious as they listen to him.

In the corner of their eyes, one can see reflections of the massive arena that has been constructed to float in the air next to the Royal Isle.

It is the day after the Council of Kings.

Knights from every realm are gathering as well, to discuss the information their Kings had brought back from their Council. The stated point of their meeting is to discuss a plan of action for any sort of "incident" that may occur during the tournament, but in truth, this gathering of Knights is nothing short of a strategy meeting for how they are to fight the demons menacing every part of the continent. The location for their meeting is, of course, the host kingdom for the tournament: Doran.

"Why, out of all the magic types, does it have to be Ice?"

They have arrived at the fortress belonging to the Royal Order of Knights of Doran. Next to the gray barracks lay the wide-open grassy field they used for training, along with two other buildings: the commander's personal quarters and the conference hall that doubled as their cafeteria.

Inside the fortress's conference hall are gathered the leaders of each Order of Knights from around the continent, around forty men in all. They have on green, blue, red, and brown garb, and each wear the tough, intense expressions one would expect of them. As this is the second time in three months that they've gathered together, they've already made themselves well acquainted with each other, and their discussion proceeds smoothly. They are all surrounding a large round table as they speak, but not a one of them is sitting, for no chairs are present at this table.

The one leading the discussion is the Knight Commander of Doran, Grove. He has a map of the continent spread out on the table in front of him as he addresses the others. A gathering of all the top Knights in the land attracts

attention and concern from aristocratic superiors, and it is with expressions of watchful caution that various ministers of state standing behind the circle of Knights oversee the proceedings.

Among the ministers is Marquess Caromines. His red hair is not as conspicuous as it normally would be, likely because of the red uniforms of various Knights scattered around the room. Red hair is in and of itself a rather unusual trait to possess, and usually attracts the gaze of all those around him, but he hardly merits any special attention from the others, colorful as they themselves are in origin, rank, and hairstyle. He stands behind and between Zenon and Grove, arms folded, listening closely to every word spoken.

“The traces of demonic magic we followed all the way across the ocean have disappeared.”

“The Devil has appeared in a new Kingdom, one neighboring Doran.”

Both of these matters had been discussed in the Bacches, the Council of Kings.

“It’s come to our attention that demons are, apparently, weak against the attack magics used by Ice-type mages.”

This is, of course, the real topic of today’s conversation: how to use this newly discovered weakness in their joint operations against the demons.

“We’ve verified the number of Ice-types in our Kingdom to be as few as seven individuals.”

“You are blessed to have seven. In Morondo, there are far fewer than that.”

The number of Ice mages in every country is far lower relative to the other types. After the horrible incident in Orcinus a year prior, resulting in the deaths of several valuable Ice mages, they are even fewer than before.

“Why, indeed, do Ice-types have the ability to better fight the demons?”

And so the topic of discussion moves onto the Queen of Orcinus.

“According to the current King of Orcinus, King Gouzukrin—who was Crown Prince at the time of the Operation—the former aide to the Queen has been heard saying that it ‘wasn’t enough,’ when interrogated about what the Queen

did to those mages.”

“‘Wasn’t enough’?” A minister standing behind the Knights raises an eyebrow and his voice as he asks this. “Was he referring to the collecting of blood?”

Borizurie answers him. “It most likely was referring to the amount of Ice mage blood she had gathered.”

“If demons are weak against Ice-types, there is the possibility that this Devil was working as hard as it could to eliminate Ice mages entirely.”

“Well, if Ice-types are their natural enemies, wouldn’t it be *natural* of us to gather all the Ice mages of the continent and have them help us fight them off?”

“About that—”

A Knight dressed in black raises his hand. It’s Alois. The conference hall is crowded and noisy, but his clear, calm voice cuts across the table to interrupt every conversation in the room.

“I do not believe that would be wise.”

He looks up from the map he’s holding in his hands, with all of its careful notes detailing where demons have appeared recently, to meet the gazes of the ministers around him.

Zenon’s surprised at his sudden interjection. “Alois?” He hasn’t seen him since earlier this morning, and hadn’t thought he’d be here. *I guess he is the palace’s Chief Mage...but shouldn’t he be busy doing something else right now? I thought he’d be casting defensive magic circles around the Isle to protect us, or leading his subordinates around the arena to investigate it for any building flaws and test its durability. When did he get here, anyway?*

“Should we gather together all those it most wants to have,” Alois continues, “we will be doing *exactly* what it wants us to do.”

One of the ministers standing across the table doesn’t look convinced. “Even so...”

Alois completely ignores him. One might even say he looks a bit irritated at being contradicted.

His golden hair hangs loose, flowing down to his chest, shifting and shimmering with every slight movement he makes, like the very flickering of a candle's flame.

Of course he's irritated. What's being proposed is to essentially use Ice mages as bait to lure in the Devil.

This whole tournament's one giant piece of bait, if you ask me.

Each country is aiming to, essentially, use the tournament to draw in every demon from across the continent and then exorcise them all at once. Rather than an exorcism, what they truly are planning for is an extermination.

Canceling the Wall Helenus would require the consent of a majority of the participating countries. Zenon's father, Zerolight, had at one point sought for them to come to a consensus around canceling the tournament, but the only royals that had supported him had been those from the neighboring countries of Vestanu and Sheera, nowhere near enough to force a cancellation, despite what he might wish.

That is how the King had been forced to push on with the Wall Helenus, forced to plan and host a massive tournament that brought little else but honor and prize money to the winning teams.

The other Kings must know what they are doing: using Doran as demon bait. Why else would they have arranged for this strategy meeting to be held, and sent their own Knights to work the security detail?

"Now now, gentlemen. We surely can all take heart in the fact that we are blessed with the presence of not one, but *two* Ancient-class mages among our ranks."

"Were the gods to truly answer our prayers, an Ice mage with Ancient-class abilities would appear. That would be heartening indeed."

"For that, we must rest our hopes that such a one shall come to the Wall Helenus and reveal themselves in the competition."

Alois glares at the ministers having this discussion, unable to conceal his disgust. Repeatedly, he presses a finger against his lips as if to restrain himself from reprimanding them for expecting for someone else to solve their

problems.

My Third Year as a Receptionist Lady, Part One

"Come here."

"Come here."

"Not enough."

"Not enough."

"Satisfy me."

Scarlet light falls through the windows.

"Nnnnngh..."

I rub my eyes as I get up from my bed. *Sunset already?*

My feet drag against the floor as I make my way over to the washbasin. I take one look at my drowsy reflection and throw some cold water on my face to wash away the sleep. *It's just about time to be heading into work.*

I'm starting my third year as a receptionist lady. *Time passed by so quickly.*

By the time I walk in through the Guild doors, I'm still fixing my sleeves so that they hang right while biting back a yawn. The first thing I smell is that subtle aroma of *wood* permeating the whole building—then I smell what's cooking in the canteen. I haven't eaten any breakfast this morning, and I'm practically drooling at all the flavors in the air. *It's okay, I can do this; I'll eat some of that meat during my break. Before my shift starts, I better go put in an order with the old man working the kitchens tonight.*

As I'm walking through the guild office, I greet everyone I see, making my way towards the desk where Ms. Zozo is sitting. She's just finished the day shift, and I'll be taking over her position for the night shift.

"Good evening," I say. *"I'm sure you must be tired after working all day."*

"Oh, hey, Nanalie."

She told me awhile ago that she'd be taking a few days off from work before the tournament started. As we exchange places she invites me to go out for a meal with her during her mini-vacation.

"That's right, Zozo," I nod, "you're off-duty starting tomorrow, aren't you?"

"You betcha! I gotta train up a little before the competition."

"Ah, Cheena, hi there." I wave at my junior colleague as she leans in to join our conversation.

"Miss Hel! There've been so many people here today..."

"It sure does seem like everyone's trying to squeeze in a bit of work before the tournament."

Cheena's started sitting at the sorcerer's reception desks this year, and she'd been sitting next to Zozo while they worked the day shift. Her cute, round eyes grow wide as she surveys the Guild hall. Harré is packed with sorcerers.

"Hey—! Lady, can I have these two requests—?"

"Why yes, you can. Please do come back here right after you've completed them."

"You got any demons in the south that need exorcising? Leave 'em to me!"

Harré is full of sorcerers chattering excitedly as they wait in line and read the notice board. *Everyone must want to earn some money before the Wall Helenus starts in a few days.*

The number of demon sightings remains as high as ever, and I catch glimpses of Knights fighting them all over the place whenever I go to request reconnaissance. *An exorcism is practically an everyday request at this point. Thanks to the work of the sorcerers, the demons haven't gotten out of hand, but the average person in town has definitely noticed a change—just the other day, didn't someone say that "there's been a lot more of them recently?"*

There'd been no *new* sightings or reports of demonic activity within the past month, however, so everyone's feeling a bit relieved at the idea that we might have already passed peak demon. What's keeping the sorcerers busy now is taking care of the backlog of exorcism requests that built up in the months

prior.

The Order of Knights has been quite busy as well, from what I've heard. Nikeh sent me a letter the other day telling me that she "wouldn't be able to see me for a while," which told me enough to know that the situation is quite serious.

On a different note, the year is now 3668, by Arland's Reckoning. It is the second month of the Season of Light.

This year, three new recruits have joined Harré—and that's before we've even done any sort of work promoting the Guild!

I strike up a conversation with Ms. Harris, who's working the night shift with me.

"Maybe this means we don't even have to participate in the tournament, yeah?"

We've been working since dusk, and it's now the middle of the night. It's just us two on the clock right now, all the other employees have gone home.

Six months have passed since the Director started letting me work the night shift, and lately I've been feeling as though day and night have switched places in my mind. Whenever I do have to work the occasional daytime shift, I can't stop yawning. I am, however, a professional—I conceal my yawns from our clients and sorcerers.

The new recruits consist of two women and one man. All three of them are full of verve and motivation, to the point where they nearly overwhelm Zozo with questions every time she tries to teach them something new. The Director chose her (again) to be a mentor for the newbies, and she gripes about them to me whenever we visit the bathhouse together.

Ms. Harris and some of the other employees have suggested that since we got more new people who joined the Guild this year, we don't need to participate in the tournament—to which the Director replied that we needed more "every year, not just this year," so we "had no choice but to join." *She's not changing her mind, that's clear.*

"Ms. Harris, you're going to be watching the tournament, right?"

“Yeah! I’m kinda looking forward to seeing some of my colleagues competing out there on the field.”

Since it’s highly unlikely sorcerers will be coming into the guild looking for work during the tournament—or anybody coming in for any reason at all, for that matter—the Director has decreed the days of the competition to be the once-a-decade “Harré Holidays” during which the Guild will be closed. If anyone *did* have something they urgently needed taken care of, all they have to do is ring the doorbell, and the Director herself would deal with whatever happened to need her attention. *She’s thought of everything.*

A sorcerer opens the Guild doors, causing the bell to let out a little *ring-a-ling!* as he comes inside, ready to take on an assignment. His boots scrape the floor as he walks over to the reception counter. Once he’s standing in front of me, he leans over, plants one elbow on my desk, and runs his hand through my hair. With a wink, he slips me a sly smile, saying, “Beautiful as ever. Are you free tonight?”

The first time I’d been invited out on a date like this, I’d panicked. Lately, though, I’ve finally gotten accustomed to this type of guy. I’m not flustered at all as I pull out a request form from under my desk and sigh internally. *This again.*

“Good evening, Mr. Peggi. There’s been a report of a strange creature lurking around Thor’s Fountain late at night—what do you say to taking a look into that?”

“Hmph. You’re not one who plays along, are you?”

“Just sign your name here, please.”

“Why of course, my lady receptionist.”

The sorcerer, a brown-haired, not-quite-middle aged man, signs his name on the request form and heads back out into the town’s night, spirits high and whistling to himself as he goes.

“Flirty as always, isn’t he?”

“Sure, but he does take any job I offer him with a smile, every time. I must admit I *was* rather surprised when I found out that he’s Ms. Berryweather’s

older brother.”

“Well, they are alike in some ways—they both act as though they’re just doing work for fun, I think.”

Ms. Berryweather, who works in the Guild’s southern branch office, apparently has an older brother. Lately, he’s started coming into headquarters where I work to look for jobs. Every single time—as if he’d *drop dead* if he didn’t talk to a woman—he’d try asking out one of the receptionist ladies on a date. He’d even asked Cheena.

When I’d asked her about it, she’d said, “Ah, I might have even gone out with him, had he not been the older brother of one of my colleagues...” She’d thought of him as “fairly cool” and had actually been torn about turning him down.

Ms. Harris *tsk tsk*s in exasperation as she watches him leave. “A man who acts like that, who pretends he has *no idea* how he comes off to women—it’s all an act. Anyways, the map on the notice board’s gotten old. The Director told me we should put up a new one.”

“Would you like to do that now?”

It’s nice to have a productive use for those times when we don’t have clients or sorcerers to serve.

We resolve to replace the map. I go over and remove the old one from the notice board, bringing it over to the desk where Mr. Alkes usually sits, doing clerical work. Ms. Harris spreads out a roll of parchment paper made especially for maps over the desk. The map that had been up on the notice board had apparently been up there for *thirty years*—very old, in other words. The paper the Director had bought us looks fine enough to last sixty years without so much as a small tear forming in the paper. *I remember her being very proud when she told us how she’d found this paper.*

“Nanalie,” Ms. Harris says while adjusting the old map to match the new paper’s edges, “anything good happen in your personal life recently?”

“Pardon?”

“I mean, even the sorcerers are noticing just how nicely you’re prettying

yourself up these days.”

“Oh, uh, no, it’s nothing like *that* at all. I, in fact, want to ask why they would say something like that.”

Benjamin had said the same thing when I met up with her the other day, but I haven’t changed anything about myself at all. *I suppose I haven’t cut my bangs in a while, and the back and sides of my hair have grown a good deal longer as well, but other than that...?*

Ms. Harris and the other receptionists are so much prettier than I am. Why would they say that about me?

“You wouldn’t happen to be meeting up with that handsome noble Captain, now would you?”

“*Why* is *he* the person you start asking about?!”

“Aha! Look! You’re blushing a little...”

“No, I’m not.” I look down at the map. One of the place names catches my eye. “Hey, take a look—right now, my mother’s visiting here, for one of her surveys.” On the map of the continent is one of the countries my mother’s visiting for an archaeological survey. She’s looking into ancient ruins, specifically.

“You said your mom’s into ancient ruins, right?” Ms. Harris gasps as she makes a realization. “Isn’t this the place where the Grave of the Fire Ancient was found?!”

“Yes, it is.”

“Whaaaaat?! Your mother really is a mover and shaker! Like mother, like daughter!”

The “Ancients,” as they are called, are said to be the first six mages to have been born in this world. They were the individuals who had created the very foundations of magic, and are referred to as the Revered Spirits at times as well.

Specifically, when one incants the spell of the Guardian Spirit, it activates the power of the Ancients within the caster to cause their body to release the

maximum amount of magic possible. By using the names of the ancestors as wards against evil, the caster is temporarily *placing their soul under the care of the Ancients*, and as such, it is an extremely advanced spell, one that *cannot* result in a failed casting without severe consequences. Once under its protection, it would defend you from all that would try to harm you.

But that's not all the spell does. Apparently, whenever it's used, a faint image of one of the ancestors will appear near the caster. The last time I used the spell I hadn't had the chance to look around for that ghost-like apparition, and I rather doubt whether one *really* appears anyway. *Seems like a nice story, but made-up.*

Benjamin, however, says she's seen the apparitions before: two, of them, both beautiful women.

I resume my conversation with Ms. Harris. "Of the hypothesized six Graves, only Fire and Ice hadn't been found yet. My father told me my mother was overjoyed when she heard the news about the Fire Grave..."

"She's an archaeologist, right?"

I nod, unsurprised that she knows. My mother had been featured in the newspaper for her work, after all. "Yes," I say, "she really loves adventure. That reminds me—" I glance over at the notice board. "She told me that there aren't enough people available to help out with the surveys of the ruins. Just the other day, we had a request come in for sorcerers who could read ancient runes, didn't we?"

"No one wants to head out on a months-long survey the week before the Wall Hellenus, though. That's why none of the sorcerers have asked about it."

"Ye-Yea...yawn...ah, excuse me," I mumble, clumsily attempting to conceal my yawning by placing a hand over my mouth.

"Not getting enough sleep?"

I freeze at Ms. Harris's question, hand still covering my mouth.

I've definitely been getting "sleep"...but to tell the truth, I haven't felt like I've been getting any rest at all.

It's all because of that dream I keep having.

"Come here, come here," that strange beast would call out to me, whispering in my ear. *"I'm busy sleeping here,"* I'd think. *"Save it for later."* I'd ignore it, but it would go on from dusk till dawn.

I'd talked with Zozo about it, and she'd lent me a book on oneiromancy. When I'd paged through it looking for an entry that described what I was experiencing every night, I'd found this:

"In dreams where you are called for by someone, it is a sign that a person either needs you, or that they wish you harm."

It's kind of nice to think that someone needs me, but "wishes me harm"? Come on, that's too scary to think about.

"I'll have a nice long sleep when I go home today," I say, forcing a smile as I reply to Ms. Harris.

Because of that dream, because of that *nightmare*, I've hardly gotten any sleep at all recently.

My Third Year as a Receptionist Lady: The Tournament

Floating next to the Royal Isle is a new island, made of rock, steel, and brick. Well, perhaps “island” isn’t the best word for it—it’s the stadium for the Wall Helenus. Above the six levels of the circular coliseum is no ceiling but the sky itself. At ground level on the arena are platforms where the competitors will fight. The second to sixth floors are all made up of seating for spectators, who will look down from their perches on high to watch the battles below.

Surrounded by the spectator seats above, the platforms are covered with dirt. The fighting events have not yet started, so there are still grounds people working the surface of the fighting platforms to ensure the dirt lies flat and smooth. Each of them wield broom-like staffs, sweeping and brushing away all irregularities.

The third floor of the coliseum consists of all the seats set aside for distinguished guests. There, all the aristocrats and royal families visiting from foreign countries will be seated.

I’d thought there wouldn’t be too many people here today, given that only the opening ceremonies are going to be held, but my expectations were completely off; there is a huge number of people pushing to get in through the gates.

“The entrance is this way!”

“Please do not push forward!”

So begins the first day of the tournament.

In addition to the stadium itself, special landing grounds have been constructed on this artificial island. They are filled with jostling horse-drawn carriages, used by those who do not possess a familiar. The vast majority of the people here today are from Doran, but about twenty percent of the spectators have come from Doran’s neighboring countries, in addition to a small but

significant set who've come from farther away.

Doran's aristocrats have all been sent invitations to attend the tournament, so all they need to do is show those to us receptionists as they quickly and efficiently file past our desks. The commoners, on the other hand, need to buy tickets at the entrance, so they're taking a good deal of time to make it inside.

There haven't been any rules given to us about rationing tickets for any given level of seats. The palace administrators had simply said to "squeeze everyone into" the level they wanted to sit at, which has ended up with me passing out a lot of level two tickets. The work itself isn't difficult, and time flows by as I pass out ticket after ticket.

So far, I haven't spotted any gate crashers. Everyone's just patiently waiting in line, which certainly makes my job easier. Among those buying tickets are kids I remember growing up with back in the village, as well as a bunch of other acquaintances and former classmates, like Mr. Yakkurin's little sister, Kara Yakkurin.

Mr. Yakkurin's doing reception with me today. When he sees his little sister, his eyes go wide with surprise. "You're *back*?" Kara just laughs and brushes a lock of her long, straight brown hair behind her ear. *Seems like she wants to keep her adventures a secret.*

Around the time that the opening ceremonies are about to start, there's a good deal fewer people packing the reception area. I take a moment to breathe and count the remaining tickets—but while I'm doing so, a little blue bird quietly lands on my yellow rock receptionist desk.

Mr. Yakkurin doesn't notice, busy as he is helping another someone else. I set down the tickets in my hand and give the bird a gentle pat on the head. The little bird twitches its beak open and shut—but what I hear is not birdsong, but the voice of one of my receptionist colleagues at Harré.

"Hey you three, would one of you mind coming over to help out at the competitors' reception desks?"

This little creature's called a "messenger fowl," and while it may look and act like a lively bird, it's actually a type of magical device. When a mage touches its head, it activates in response to their magic. They can be used to record a voice

message or replay one, and are frequently entrusted to carry important information to far-off recipients. *Rather convenient to have around, these little birds.*

It opens its mouth to repeat the message, but I give it another tap to silence it. *Cheepcheepcheep!* Its head tilts to one side, then stops.

I stand up from my seat and call out to one of the men sitting to my left, who's busy doing reception work. "I'll go help out with competitor reception."

"Thank you," he replies. I spoke with him a bit before our shift started. Normally, he works in the Royal Courts, but he got roped into doing reception for the Wall Helenus this week, just like Mr. Yakkurin and I were.

All told, three of the receptionists working here today are from Harré, and another three are from the Royal Courts. I recall seeing their faces back at the orientation meeting I attended at the palace, but there hadn't been any special "receptionists only" meeting back then, so today's the first time we've had a chance to speak to each other. It's not the most comfortable thing in the world, working with essentially strangers to pull off a major world event, but by working with one another to perform our simple, routine duties, we naturally come together as a team. While we're too busy to speak much with each other, our common purpose allows us to get past any awkwardness or shyness and have normal conversations when we need to.

They probably need me over there sooner rather than later. I summon Lala and hop on her back, my white skirt fluttering in the air. Today, I'm wearing not what I usually do when I'm out in town, but my Harré uniform. The other two receptionists from the guild are also wearing their uniforms. The people from the palace hadn't told us to come dressed in anything special, nor had they prepared any clothes for us. When I'd asked the speaker back at the orientation meeting what we should wear, he'd told me that I could "wear whatever I wanted," and after talking it over with the other two receptionists, we'd decided on wearing our uniforms.

Perhaps that's why we're attracting stares and comments today, like "Why is a Harré employee doing reception *here* today?"

One of my frequent clients, a pharmacist, had been quite surprised to see me.

“Ms. Hel,” he’d asked, “did you change jobs or something?!”

HA! As if I’d ever do that.

“Well now, look at this. The stadium’s rather stunning from above, isn’t it?”

“Sorry for making you drag me around everywhere, Lala.” I rub her neck as she flies through the air. Competitor reception is on the other side of the stadium, a bit too far for me to run. *This place sure is huge. If you put the school and the stadium side by side, why, the latter would make the former look positively tiny!*

I look down at the spectators in their seats below me. They’re all moving their heads from side to side, chattering with one another. Seeing all of them moving like that makes it feel like my whole field of vision is shaking. There are commoners, aristocrats, and sorcerers among them, of various nationalities and ethnicities.

Something else catches my eye. *Doran may be called the “Kingdom of Flowers,” but this whole island’s been made with rocks, bricks, and steel. That must be why they had those Earth mages grow those flowers and plants all over the stadium. It’s not even the Season of Flowers, though, so seeing all that feels a bit weird.*

“Ah, Lala, over there! Towards the gap in the walls!”

“Yes, master.”

Riding on Lala’s back, I pass over the open-air coliseum. The spectator’s seats are almost entirely filled up, all the way to the fifth level. *Only the opening ceremonies are happening today—just how many people are planning on coming tomorrow?* I grimace at the thought.

We arrive at the other side of the stadium. I step down off of Lala’s back and shrink her down enough to fit in the palm of my hand, then place her on my shoulder. *Off we go.*

There are still a lot of people in this reception area. *Let’s see, competitor reception lasts until noon today, right? The cathedral bells should tell us when to stop. There’s less than three hours to go until then, but I bet more six-person teams will be coming soon.*

“It’s like I said, one of our members is running late.”

“We can’t register you for the tournament until all six of you are here, so I’m afraid we’ll have to wait until they arrive.”

“Which of your members is the Ice-type?”

“I’m the Ice-type!”

“Incant the *semeion* spell, please.”

I watch the activity going on in all three of the long lines for a little while.

There are two types of reception going on for the tournament today: the first is for the spectators on the other side of the tournament, and the second is here, for the competitors. The spectator reception desks obviously deal with a lot more people, but those working over here seem like they have to deal with some tough customers.

There are groups trying to force their way into the entrance despite the fact they don’t meet the minimum of six members required, and there are groups lying and trying to compete without an Ice-type. *About thirty percent of the teams here don’t seem to satisfy the requirements for entry.*

I shake my head. *Hello? Aren’t we all adults here? If you can’t follow the rules, please spare us all the trouble. ...Still, when I see that guy, who’s pretending to be an Ice-type, speaking with tears in his eyes about how he’s worked so hard these past five years to achieve his dream of becoming a competitor in the Wall Helenus...it almost makes me want to let him through. We’ve got to obey the rules, though. The other receptionists clearly know that.* I hear one of my colleagues tell the fake Ice-type to hit the road. *Just the kind of resolve I’d expect from someone at the Guild.*

Anyways, it’s your fault, dude—you “work hard” for five years, but show up the day of the event and lie about being an Ice-type? What’s the deal? Clearly you weren’t “working hard” in the right way. Someone, please set this guy straight.

“Ah, Nanalie! So glad to see you here! Would you mind doing the registration for that line?”

“I’ll get right on it!”

I sit down at the empty desk and pick up the registration sheet. “Those in the back of the line, please come over here to sign in!”

There are three things I need to verify before I can formally register a team:

Are there six members?

After casting *semeion*, do they all have different magic types?

Finally, what are their names and ages?

The only individuals allowed to participate in the tournament are adults, eighteen years or older. No children. They have to sign their names on the registration sheet, because after we finish doing reception, we’ll use the information on these sheets to pair them up for the team battles. By signing their names they are entering into a magical contract; should someone under eighteen years old falsify their age, their team wouldn’t be included in the matchups. The same goes for those who *are* eighteen or older, but still falsify their ages anyhow.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my colleagues from Harré and employees from the Royal Court promptly sort the problem teams from the good ones. Before me, a new line forms, and I begin working.

“Your team name is ‘Lost Avantio,’ correct?”

“Yeah!”

“Please line up and cast the *semeion* spell from left to right,” I say. They do so, and one by one, stick out a hand, cast the spell, and reveal their types. *All six.*

“Thank you very much. Sign here and write your ages too, please.” I hold out the registration sheet and they fill it in.

“Excellent, you’ve all been registered! Please continue on inside. Through the entrance behind me is a hallway leading towards the standby seating on the first floor for competitors. We’re expecting it to fill up today, so please sit in open seats closest to the middle of the row. Here is a map of the stadium for your reference.”

“Sweet! Thanks, lady!”

“Yeah! We’ll head over there now!”

I watch them make their way down the hall, each of them waving excitedly at me as they pass by.

“Next!” And so the next group comes, and the next one after that, and on I go, registering them all. Fortunately, nobody in my line tries to cheat their way inside, but there are a number of groups who come up and ask me, “Can we compete even though there aren’t six of us? We don’t have an Ice-type...” A few of them look like they’re about to cry as they say this, but rules are rules.

“Guess we just can’t fight, then...” almost all of them say, giving up and going home.

Are Ice-types really that rare? Between all the reception desks is a box containing the filled registration sheets. I take a peek at them to see that not even a third of the box next to me is full. *That’s probably only about fifty teams. Not that many for a continent-wide tournament.*

I realize that there are only three groups left in my line. *The end is in sight.*

Just a few moments ago, the team from Harré completed their registration at the desk next to me, where someone from the Royal Courts is taking care of reception. Mr. Alkes had, apparently, overslept, and Ms. Zozo had been sharply exasperated with how he’d made all of them wait until right before the cutoff to complete their registration. One of the other receptionists hadn’t beaten around the bush when she’d reprimanded him, saying, *“You sure you still want to do this? Because it sure seems like you don’t. Get a grip.”*

As one of two men in the group, he must have felt outnumbered. When the team passed through the rear entrance, I heard him mumble out a “sorry” to his teammates, completely at odds with how he was the senior-most member of the team. *That was something to see—whatever happened to that commanding dignity he usually walks around with?*

Hmm, that reminds me—I still haven’t seen Satanás or the rest of his team. I wonder if they completed their registration before I got over here.

I return my attention to the group standing in front of me. “Your team name is ‘The Knight’s Order of Vestanu,’ correct?”

The succession of male and female Knights clad in their green uniforms cast *semeion* for me, fill out the registration form, and a man with ocher hair hands it back to me. “Thanks—oho? My lady, we’ve met before, haven’t we?”

“Excuse me?”

Do I know this guy? I glance back down at the registration sheet. *Is he...Borizurie?*

My eyes go wide at the name. *Borizurie, of the Knight’s Order of Vestanu. Even I know who that is—a super super super awesome mage, chosen as one of this year’s “Top One Hundred Sublime Mages of the Modern Age.”*

While my jaw is flapping open and shut in shock, Mr. Borizurie has a flash of realization. “Aha!” He turns towards the neighboring line of competitor teams and addresses the man at the front of the line.

“Alois, isn’t she the one who you shapeshifted into?”

The man he’s addressing to my right is part of the group being helped right now by one of my fellow Guild receptionists.

Here I was, happy to have at least one nice thing happen today, and then this.

For some unfathomable reason, I’m *constantly* running into this guy, and moreover, it’s always at a time I don’t want to see him (that is to say, “all the time”), yet we *have* to interact regardless, because we’re forced to or the situation demands it. In circumstances like these, I’d say I almost certainly would have expected him to magically show up in my line, but I’d gotten lucky today and he’d lined up at a different receptionist’s desk. When I’d first realized this, I’d balled up my fists and pounded my knees with excitement—under the desk, of course. *Can’t have people see me do that on the job.*

But life often doesn’t go how you’d want it to. *Just another team or two to register, then I can leave here and go back to spectator reception.* Or so I’d thought, and then *this* happened.

Why, why, WHY would you bring me to his attention, Mr. Borizurie?

Rockmann turns to look at me. “It’s been half a year since I saw you last. You’ve gotten pretty *old*, haven’t you?”

“Eat shit, you eternally, *heinously* perverted bastard in sheep’s clothing.”

I’m so mad I want to stamp my feet at the sight of the group from Doran’s Royal Order of Knights.

“Oh really, you eternally rebellious, two-faced girl?”

“Ha! Two-faced! You’re one to talk.”

“Don’t suppose that mouth of yours would do us all the favor of shutting up.”

“You heretical, cold-blooded, blonde *savage*...”

“Goodness, look at the way your lips flap about. Even a fish gasping for breath would be impressed. Have you finally given up on being human?” He folds his arms and laughs at me.

I am *extremely* angry right now, but I decide to limit myself to a battle of words rather than spells.

What kind of guy tells a young, single woman that she’s “gotten pretty old”? He’s asking for it!

I notice two of the lady Knights from Vestanu blushing at the sight of Rockmann. They’re not *quite* so taken with him as the noble girls tend to be, but I can definitely imagine what they’re thinking: “*Ah, which one am I going to choose? Sir Borizurie or this handsome blond Knight from Doran?*”

Stop it, girls. Mr. Borizurie is several times more handsome than this bastard is. He’s not just a man, but manly! Handsomely manly!

I would like to say this out loud, but I feel that not everyone may pick up on the fictive conversation going on inside my head.

At least there aren’t any other teams waiting to be registered right now.

Rockmann’s dressed in his black Knight’s uniform today. Before insulting me, he had just finished signing his name on the registration sheet. The pen’s still in his hand.

Mr. Borizurie was the one who spoke to you, not me. Why’d you have to go out of your way to insult me when I’m not even part of the conversation?! Idiotic, is what your behavior is.

Behind Rockmann, I see a familiar face. Among the two lady Knights in the team is none other than Ms. Weldy. “You’re working here as well? Goodness, you must be busy. Were you dispatched from the Guild to help with the event?”

“Yes, I suppose you could say I was ‘dispatched.’”

“Hmm. I must say, I *do* wish that you would be a little more respectful towards our Captain.”

“I’m not sure I can do that.”

Apparently she’s stopped getting furious about the things I say to Rockmann. She *does* end our little conversation with a “*Tsk tsk. Ever a rude one you are.*” *I got off lightly there. She didn’t chew me out like she did last time, at least. If she’s here, I guess she must be participating in the Wall Helenus...*

Mr. Borizurie is a good deal more polite than Rockmann. “Alois, you know it’s rude to tell a woman she’s ‘gotten old.’ Don’t you agree, my lady?”

“Y-Yes...”

“Ah, but I do think I can see it now, you *were* the one who he was disguised as.” *He must be referring to the Orcinus Operation.* Mr. Borizurie stares at me for a while, stroking his chin thoughtfully. *The Knights of Vestanu were part of that operation, weren’t they? He must’ve seen Rockmann shapeshifted into...me.*

Once we finish registering these two teams, I’ll be done with competitor reception, and with this conversation. *Come on! Hurry it up!*

...Ah, but this is a rare opportunity, isn’t it? A chance to speak with Mr. Borizurie, face to face. Surely a little more conversation... No. Can’t do that. Not while he’s here, at any rate.

I tap my cheeks and redirect my attention back to my work. *They probably need me over there on the other side. Better get done with this soon.*

“Lala, mind getting bigger?”

“Are we flying back now?”

“Yeah.”

And so with the chime of the noon bells, competitor registration ends. After giving the Knights of Vestanu a succinct explanation of the stadium and their seats, I start cleaning up my reception desk.

Both teams of Knights, however, make no motion towards the stadium's entrance, choosing to remain chattering away where they are. *Can't you talk in the standby seats for the competitors?*

"So Doran's sending out *you* six," Mr. Borizurie says. "Is Commander Grove not joining you?"

"He told me he'd prefer watching the fights. More importantly, who are these ladies you've got on your team? Don't think I've seen them around before. Think you could introduce me?"

"Captain Alois! *We* are here, are we not! You do not need to be 'introduced' to any more ladies!"

"Yes, indeed!"

Rockmann must've caught on to how those women from Vestanu were blushing when they looked at him. What was he thinking, though, asking for an "introduction" when Ms. Weldy and the other lady Knight from Doran are standing right next to him? Of course they're going to be offended. I casually glance at the other male Knights standing around the two Captains. All of them certainly look jealous. I don't understand why they're jealous of Rockmann, of all the bastards, but it's quite obvious how they feel.

"There's only about thirty minutes until the opening ceremonies start," I say, standing up from my seat. "That said, there's no rule forcing you to participate once registered, so I don't mind at all if you stay here the entire time. The entire five days, in fact." I move to lay the registration sheet for the Vestanu team into the box.

"Wait, O lady of the blue hair—would you care to have dinner with me this evening?"

"Me?"

I freeze. I'm still holding the registration sheet in one hand, stuck in a ridiculous posture. From my shoulder, Lala lets out a cry of dismay as she nearly

topples to the ground.

Mr. Borizurie, who up until a moment ago had been speaking with Rockmann, is bending over to look me in the eye.

Ah! In surprise, I back up a few steps. Shoot. That probably was a bit rude.

“Forgive me, my lady. My name is Sarenja Borizurie. What might your name be?”

“Nanalie Hel...”

“Haha! What an exciting lady you are. Defiant words may you direct at Alois, but your intensity, your *passion*—I’ve never met someone like you.”

I don’t think he’s complimenting me right now.

“I-Is that so? Thanks for inviting me, but I’ve got plans for tonight. Sorry.”

I give him a quick bow of farewell, then hurry over to where my fellow receptionists are waiting. From behind me, I hear him say something like “Ah! She ran away...” but I’m not sure if his tone is disappointed or amused. *Whatever he’s feeling, it’s quite apparent that I made the right choice in turning down his offer. “Dinner?” I very much doubt that’s what he’d planned for us to enjoy together tonight.*

I got that same vibe from him that I get from Rockmann.

One of the senior receptionists watching all this happen seems concerned for me. “Nanalie, are you sure you don’t want to go? Share a meal with him, at least?”

“Whatever are you saying? I’d much prefer to eat with my Guild colleagues. We promised we’d all have dinner together tonight, didn’t we? How could you forget something like that...”

“That’s—that’s not—I didn’t forget...”

“Do you mind if I put this registration sheet in the box? It’s the last one.”

“The Knights all came at the end, didn’t they? One of the Royal Court people took care of a team of Knights from Sheera too.”

“Is that so? ...Hm?”

Right before I put the Vestanu sheet in the box, my eyes are drawn towards something written on one of the other papers in there.

The other receptionists notice my pause. “Um, Nanalie? Is there something wrong? Did we make a mistake?” One of them places her hand on my shoulder, looking worried.

“The Year 3644, by Arland’s Reckoning...on the sixth day of the second month of the Season of Flowers...?”

“Is there something the matter with the Captain’s birthday?”

“Subtract twenty years from 3668 and the difference is—four?”

I pick up the Doran Knight’s registration sheet and dash over to where they’re still chattering. Without any warning or waiting for him to stop talking, I give Rockmann’s back an insistent *tap*. All of the other Knights turn to look at me after I do so. *Oh, this is awkward. But he should thank me for helping him correct such a basic mistake.*

“Hey, you—you messed up here.”

“Where?”

“With this date, that would mean you’re twenty-four years old.”

The instant I say this, however, he lets out the weirdest groan of anguish, like he’s a frog I’ve just stepped on. “Gah!”

“Gah?”

“Never mind.”

Must’ve caught him off guard. He holds one hand over his mouth and makes a big show of coughing and clearing his throat. *What was that all about? And why isn’t he looking me in the eye?* I stare right at him, but he looks uncomfortable, averting his gaze somewhere to my right.

“That’s not actually...that’s not wrong.”

“Huh?”

“I am really twenty-four years old.”

What the heck is this bullshit he’s trying to pull?!

“Um, you know if you lie about your age, you won’t be able to participate in the tournament?”

“Yeah, but, it’s like I told you, I’m not lying.”

Mr. Borizurie lays a hand on Rockmann’s shoulder and backs him up. “Ms. Nanalie, there’s no mistaking it—he is twenty-four years old.”

“Excuse me?”

Ms. Weldy slinks over and slips an arm around Rockmann’s, looking more confident than I’ve ever seen her. “Goodness darling, didn’t you know? The Captain and I are *the same age*. Ah, he and I should have been classmates! Isn’t that right, Captain?”

What is happening here?! They can’t all three be lying with straight faces like that—which means—

“Y-You, you’re really—”

“I only started attending school once His Highness Prince Zenon was old enough to do so as well. I was his bodyguard.”

Four years older? Held back from attending school so he could be the Prince’s bodyguard? I think back to all those days when I’d lost in every competition we had, in magic and in academics. How bitter I’d felt about that. Each year, I’d been so determined to knock him down a peg and show him who the real winner was—but all the while, he was older than me? Four years older?

The man before me is not twenty, but twenty-four.

I still can’t quite believe that, even though he’s just told me himself. True, he did always seem a bit more mature than the rest of the boys. Even during our first year he struck me as a little older than the rest. But four. Years. Older?!

How come none of the noble kids ever said anything? Did no one else know?

There’s nothing I can really say about the fact of his being older, but as to how I feel about it—

“You’re *older* than me too?! Why do I have to lose to *you* even when it comes to age!!”

“Here we go again.”

I collapse down on my knees, covering my face with both hands. The shock of learning he and I are not the same age is too much for my poor stomach. It pains me, deeply.

All this time, he's been thinking things like “this young brat is awfully whiny” or “what a child” whenever we talked! No doubt about it! I grow utterly convinced that he's been taking me lightly for the entire time we've known each other.

One of my fellow receptionists comes up from behind me and begins rubbing my back. “Hey now, look what you've done to our poor Nanalie, she's quite put out. What do you intend to do about this?” *Thank you, Miss Pidget. I'm not put out, just...the shock of learning that was too much for me to handle. Nothing more.*

“It's not like I concealed that fact, and I definitely never lied about my age.”

A shadow looms over me as I kneel moping on the ground.

“I just never told you because you never asked.”

I know, alright, I know! I never asked. Not like we ever talked much anyways.

“I had some problems with my magic growing up, so my body ended up taking longer than the average person's to mature. I look about four years younger than I actually am, in fact.”

Well, he does have a point there: he had too much magical power as a child, and struggled a lot with it.

“Someone needed to be a bodyguard for Prince Zenon, and since we were the closest in age, our parents had us start school together.”

Is that how it was?

“Physically speaking, I don't think that I'm any older than you or Satanás are.”

Now I get it.

“Come on, hey—look at me.”

I thrust out my lower lip to pout. *What am I doing? Aren't I acting like a*

complete child right now? Slowly, I lift my eyes to meet his gaze. He's crouched down next to me, finally looking me in the eyes.

"Did you really want us to be the same age that badly? To be *together*?"

"Ugh. Don't say gross stuff like that."

"I did feel gross saying that, admittedly..."

Both of us have the same expression on our faces, like we just bit into a particularly nasty bit of food.

Just to make sure he doesn't understand, I repeat myself: "I am *not* feeling put out because we're not the same age, so don't you think of it like that."

"Oh is that so?" Rockmann looks completely bored when he hears me say this.

"Yeah. So why don't you run along and lose in the first bout," I spit out at him, jumping on Lala's back and flying away. Until the opening ceremonies start, I'm busy working the spectator reception desks, ready to sell tickets, although hardly anyone's still buying them by this time.

There are two reasons why we're still over here: first, there may be last minute stragglers who need tickets, and secondly, because there needs to be a security detail at each entrance of the stadium. *We're receptionists, not security guards—why do we have to do this work too?*

Sitting next to me, Mr. Yakkurin and one of the people from the Royal Court are chatting with each other.

"Not much to do now there, is there?"

"No, not much indeed."

Unexpectedly, I find myself enjoying talking with them to pass the time while we wait. A Guild receptionist and a Royal Court attendant have taken our spectator registration sheets and are delivering them to the administrators backstage.

It's too bad I can't watch from the stadium seats. At least we have these simultaneous imagers—simagers—developed by Doran's Royal Ministry of Magical Research. Inside our reception area are simager screens about the

same size as the glass windows. With them, we're able to see what's going on inside the stadium even though we're not there. They're kind of like moving picture books. I heard at the orientation meeting that they use thoughtography magic, but unlike a usual thoughtograph I can see everything that's going on inside quite clearly. The rest of the Kingdom, those who couldn't make it to the stadium in person, will be watching the events via these screens. Apparently, larger versions have been set up in several places about town, so that everyone can watch together. *It's like one big party.*

The King gives an address at the start of the ceremony. He describes how the recent increase of demons in the Kingdom has caused problems. He goes on to describe how a new continent, full of demons, has been discovered on the other side of the sea, far from our own home continent of Keedolmani. When he says this, the whole stadium of course goes abuzz with chatter. He ends his speech by saying, "Humanity may be in for dangerous times ahead. The whole continent must come together as one, and strengthen our bonds of friendship and cooperation as we train in magical arts to overcome whatever challenges may come, whether they be our opponents on the field or the demons across the sea."

Everyone applauds when he finishes saying this, but I can't help but think that he's just trying to gloss over the fact that there exists an *entire continent* full of *demons* in our world. *Hello, everyone? Let's get serious about this, shall we? Aren't we being a little hasty in dismissing this new threat?*

But the tournament's starting now, so there's no time for discussion or deliberation about what humanity's going to do about the demon continent. *That's not the only danger we have to worry about. There's that strange Devil, the one bandying about the name "Städal." I certainly can't sleep perfectly soundly at night knowing all that I do.*

Standing on a table next to the King is the platinum Champion's Cup, which only the winning team is allowed to touch. Bathed in sunlight, it scatters brilliant sparkles of light over the whole crowd.

There's a theatrical play that happens during the opening ceremonies. It's based on the first chapter of *Genesis*, and has been adapted for the stage by the famous screenwriter Lord Piring. The actor for the demon is amazingly

convincing. *Didn't he get some major acting award a little while ago?*

One of the people from the Royal Court looks really excited to see him on the screen. "I wonder if I'd be allowed to go and get his autograph later?"

The ceremonies finish, and night comes on. All of the foreign visitors are staying at Doran inns, packing all the available rooms, which leads to the nightlife being a good deal livelier than usual. Older men and women travel from inn to inn, peddling famous Doran goods to the travelers. Some of the guests have even rented out the large event halls to hold a banquet, entertained by dancing girls.

I and the rest of the employees from Harré, including Zozo and the other members of the Guild team, as well as Cheena and the other junior receptionists, have all rented out the Vegetarian Wolf for the night, and are giving the servers and cooks a lecture-demonstration in "bad manners" as we cavort and drink away the evening. The proprietress, familiar with all of us given how close her restaurant is to Harré headquarters, scolds us all by telling us to "refrain from drinking so much that we get hungover" tomorrow, but the only people who seriously listen to her are the six competitors.

"All right you six, listen here: OVERTHROW THE KNIGHT'S ORDER!!"

"Yes, yes, Director."

"Alkes! Sound like you mean it!"

"Now, now Director, let's not get carried away..."

Zozo and the rest of the Guild team members are spending the night in a special facility for tournament competitors, so we end up heading home from the restaurant earlier than we might have otherwise. I and the other receptionists working for the Wall Helenus, like Mr. Yakkurin and the people from the Royal Court, also have special accommodations set aside for us just outside the stadium itself. After splitting up from Zozo's team and the other Harré employees, I fly back up to the Royal Isle to spend the night.

"Come here."

"Not enough, not enough."

“Satisfy me.”

The words I heard in my dreams that night reverberated deep within me, louder and more insistent than ever before.

* * * *

Today, on the second day of the Wall Helenus, the team matchups are finally announced. There are even *more* people here today than there were yesterday. *They must all want to see the first fight.*

“Fifty pegalo, please.”

“Whew! That’s a lot... Ah, here ya go.”

“Please proceed to seat number 1100.”

A ticket for today’s events costs about as much as I earn in one day working as a receptionist. *Fairly expensive.* Part of the ticket money collected from the spectators funds the prize money for the winning team, so the competing teams want as many people as possible to come, both to cheer them on and to make the award that much bigger. *They should be happy with the turnout today.*

“Miz—hwat—mahney—forrr—leetle—paepurr?”

The person in front of me speaks to me in somewhat *different* Tekkru than what I speak. *If I had to guess, I’d say they’re from one of the countries on the west side of the continent, where they speak Biahnon.* “Umm...d’yu speek...Biahnon?”

“Yeh! Biahnon!”

Well, looks like I guessed that right. There are several languages spoken on Keedolmani, like Tatan in the east, Chaite to the south, and many others across the continent. Back when I’d been in magic school we’d only studied ancient runes in class, but I’d mastered several foreign languages on my own time, just in case I’d ever have a need to know them in the future. There hasn’t been *too* much reason to use them while I’ve been working at Harré, but we did get the occasional sorcerer coming in from abroad to earn some valuable pegalos, so my efforts hadn’t been all for naught.

“ALL COMPETITORS, PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE ARENA FLOOR.”

Someone must’ve used a voice magnification spell. I hear the announcement echoing throughout the whole coliseum. The King had done the same during his speech, and so had the actors during their play. *They must be planning to use that spell for doing commentary on the matches as well.*

In total, there are three hundred and sixty competitors, or sixty teams, all of which will be fighting each other in the Wall Helenus.

The first “match”—battle royale, really—is designed to eliminate over half of the teams from the competition. Based on what I heard at the orientation meeting, I’m expecting only twenty teams will still be in the running by the end of the day. *That said, they never did mention how they’d be eliminating those teams. I’m definitely interested in finding out how that’s decided...*

Spectator reception has calmed down for the moment. The three receptionists who had been working competitor reception are doing roll call for the teams down on the arena floor. If any team doesn’t gather on the floor in time for their names to be called, they’re removed from the roster.

The three of us receptionists working competitor reception look up from our desks to watch the events unfold on the simagers while we work.

“They’re starting up!”

“Here are some drinks for the two of you.”

One of the palace administrators had given me a cask at the beginning of our shift. *“Please, drink this if you become thirsty.”* I hand cold cups of black tea to one of my senior colleagues and to the Royal Court receptionist working with us today.

“Thanks, Hel.”

“Thank you very much, Ms. Hel. Oh, look—the Knights of Doran and Harré’s team are both on screen.”

He’s right—I can see Zozo and Mr. Alkes.

When the team of Doran’s Knights comes on screen, more than half the stadium erupts in cheers. “Go Doran!” “Do us proud, Knights!”

Screens have been placed even in the top levels of the stadium seating, so spectators can get a closer look at what's happening down on the field. When *he* appears on screen, I hear more than one frenetic young lady scream out in a shrill voice, "Sir Alois!"

I catch a glimpse of Satanás and Benjamine on screen as well—just a glimpse, but it's a relief to know that they made it out there. *These magic screens really are useful.* There are about five spherical objects slowly circling around the stadium, capturing all the visuals inside. It looks exactly how I remember it from when Lala and I flew over it.

"Sir Alois remains popular as ever, it seems."

"I-Indeed," I nod. My eyes narrow at the screen. "Ugh, just *listen* to all of that screaming and squealing."

"Hm? Did you say something, Nanalie?"

"Oh, nothing at all."

The Royal Court receptionist has a big smile on his face, eyes wide with anticipation. "I wonder what sort of rules they'll use for the battle royale. It's all rather exciting, isn't it?"

Right then, someone comes up to our desks to purchase a ticket, and the three of us avert our eyes away from the screen. The young man, who looks to be about twenty years old, is carrying a fistful of cash and coins in one hand. He holds it out to me, saying, "O-One ticket, please."

"Certainly. I'll—hold on?"

I peer closely at something in the air next to the young man. *Could this—?* I snap my fingers.

"Oh no!"

Another young man appears. *He must've been using a Partinteton charm to stay invisible.* I'd dispelled the charm's effect with a simple *snap*.

The now-visible youth is dumbstruck, gaping his mouth open and shut. "How did you know?!" *Well, mister, you were being quite obvious in the way you kept making repeated glances to your right, as well as looking generally uneasy.*

Then, of course, the air itself seemed out of focus, which led me to try a dispel—and look! There you were.

Incomplete Partinteton charms *can* conceal someone, but the space they occupy becomes twisted, making all who look in their direction feel uneasy. You can think that you've nailed the spell by becoming invisible, but if someone can still tell you're standing there because of the way the space around you ripples, well, you've failed to conceal yourself, haven't you?

The only entrance leading to the spectators' seats open to the general public is the one beyond our reception desks. Should a spectator try to get inside the stadium via another entrance, or just by flying in from above, the Knights on their patrol would quickly send them packing.

A spell *could* be cast to prevent any intruders from entering the stadium, but after discussing it over at the orientation meeting, it had been deemed too difficult to do properly. After all, how would you calibrate such a spell? "Remove all individuals who haven't paid the entry fee?" That wouldn't work, because then those of us working to manage the event wouldn't be able to get inside. Then, of course, there was the issue of modifying the magic circles to make them accept more complicated conditions for entry—which ended up being too much work. In the end, the administrators relied on the most primitive security measures to prevent trespassers: human receptionists.

Although, couldn't we have used a barrier like the Rockmann family uses for their residence? No untrusted acquaintances are allowed inside their mansion, and are automatically removed if they try to get in. A spell like that would allow us to filter out the legitimate attendees from the trespassers like these two.

Apparently, these two young men don't have enough money for tickets for both of them. They could've just watched from the simager screens set up around town—but they felt like they absolutely *had* to come see the match live, and so had tried to deceive us into letting them inside.

"You haven't gone inside yet, so technically speaking you are not trespassing...but try this again and it'll be straight to the prisons for you."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!!!"

"We're so sorry!"

Both young men give me a clean, snappy bow of apology, then turn tail and run back to their carriage, flying off the Isle to return to the ground below.

Just in case any others like them try gatecrashing, I take ten minutes to draw up a repulsion magic circle on a scrap piece of paper, coding it so only those using a Partinteton charm will be repulsed. I have the *Dare Labdos* absorb the paper, which I then use to cast it over the entrance. *Hmm, now that I've seen some more of the weapons the Knights use, the Dare Labdos is really more of a "mace" than a "club"...*

"Thanks, Hel. I'm guessing we'll be seeing more like that tomorrow."

"Let's be sure to be on our guard for any further trespassers."

Mr. Yakkurin and the man from the Royal Court sip their tea as they watch me work.

"Ah, Ms. Hel—it looks like the match is starting." The Court receptionist is watching the simager screen, and I direct my attention there as well.

"I, Marge Terrence, editor-in-chief of the weekly Heaven magazine, have the honor of being your host for today's match! Joining me in the commentary will be the Commander of the Order of Royal Knights, the Minister of Customs and Foreign Trade, and Princess Mislina."

So all of them will be commentators for the events. I see and hear all four of them via the simager screens.

"For the Battle Royale, the three hundred and sixty competitors in their sixty teams shall be headed towards that special sphere way up in the sky above us on a rather *special* race track! The first twenty teams, every member included, to make it up there shall proceed onto the next match. They are allowed to use magic to obstruct other teams from ascending, but they are not allowed to ride their familiars. They must go, on foot, up to the sphere—no levitation magic, no magic circles, and *all six* must get there. They are allowed to use magic to return those who fall from the track back up to their original position."

So this is... "A foot race?"

This is like one of those ridiculous contests we did as fifth years in magic

school. Why are they placing so many rules on using magic? Isn't the point to have the competitors demonstrate their magical abilities? Perhaps they want to judge their strategic sensibilities first, to see how they balance offense and defense as they make their way up there... Whatever the reason is, I really do find it odd that they couldn't have the contestants do something else.

The sixty teams are lined up from end to end of the arena, standing on the dirt floor. Before their eyes, a wide, wide yellow path materializes, beginning at their feet and spiraling up into the sky.

“Competitors! You are to run up this track, and the first twenty teams to arrive at the top shall qualify for tomorrow’s match! Prepare yourselves... ReAdY?!? SeT?!? GO!!!”

Ms. Commentator, please, calm down. You’re going to give everyone a heart attack. Also, who says “ready, set, go” for a Wall Helenus? This isn’t a kid’s relay race.

Despite the agitation of the commentator, all sixty teams are focused and determined, launching off and up the path at once. Instants later, there are explosions everywhere and competitors are flying all over the place. *What chaos!*

My eyes are drawn to a particularly large hole in the middle of the path. Competitors keep falling through it, one after the other.

“The Royal Knights have magicked the path right out of the gate...to create a pitfall!”

Cheaters.

“Later, losers!”

“You cheating scum!”

Filling the screen is Rockmann, smiling wide. *He must’ve been the one to set the trap.* He has a gloating smile on his face as he races past Satanás, who’s levitating one of his teammates back onto the path after they fell through the hole. Benjamine is standing beside him, helping their fallen comrade stand up, and then they restart their running climb up the path. Fierce as an enraged god, Satanás’s face is captured on-screen as he curses his opponent.

“I’m gonna knock that stuck-up bastard to the ground!”

Yes, Satanás, go, go, go! Send him flying right off the Isle!

* * * *

Through the trials and perils of the foot race up the yellow magic road, after catching up to and being overtaken by other competitors, Harré’s team successfully locks in third place with their arrival inside the glass sphere. All six of them, upon finishing the race, sit down in a circle, visibly exhausted. Zozo sprawls out her arms and legs, closing her eyes.

“It’s finally over.”

She glances down at those still struggling to make it up. Their looks of anguished exertion makes it quite clear to all watching that they do *not* want to keep running on the yellow magic road.

Zozo reflects on her team’s frantic battle up the path. The other two teams who arrived before them, the Knight teams from both Doran and Vestanu, are far off from where she sits.

Explosions in all directions, from the very instant we started running. All six of us made it up here, somehow, but those Knight teams sure gave us a run for our money.

“Deen? Are you feeling ill?”

“I...I don’t know why... I suppose I’m feeling a bit anemic.”

Deen, the Ice mage for Harré’s team, is holding her head in her hands, curled into a ball on the floor. “I feel like I’m about to black out.”

“We ran too much,” Zozo says, patting her back. “Just rest now.” She begins casting a healing spell on her ailing teammate.

Anemia is the most troubling symptom of disease that can befall a mage. The thinner your blood, the weaker your magic. It can grow so weak that, eventually, you become unable to use any magic at all.

“It’s okay. We’ll get you healed right up.”

“Thanks.”

Deen's cheeks regain some of their color. Zozo gives them a peppy *pat* and smiles.

Grave of the Ancient

“Dear, take a look at this.”

“What is it?”

In the Kingdom of Kaltahr, the survey of the Grave of the Fire Ancient is proceeding apace. The most talented archeologists, astronomers, and sorcerers from the world over have gathered together to assist in efforts to analyze the ruins.

Nanalie’s mother, Mimilie, is among those working in the ruins. As the world’s top scholar in studies of the Ancient’s Graves, she is well-known to her colleagues as a skilled archaeologist.

The Grave of the Fire Ancient was discovered at the base of a volcano located in the distant reaches of the continent, within the Kingdom of Kaltahr. Many scholars had come to this volcano looking for the Grave before, but none had been successful.

The man who had first found the Grave had been a mere sorcerer from Kaltahr, sent to this area to look for a certain type of magical creature. By chance, he had stumbled upon this cavern. Thinking that his quarry might reside within, he had ventured inside the tunnel entrance, to find not a magical creature but a massive Grave.

Talented scholars from all across the continent had been summoned to examine it. There are now over one hundred individuals working inside this cavern to uncover the secrets of the Grave of the Fire Ancient.

There is a reason such a large-scale survey is being conducted.

Demons have been increasing in number everywhere in recent years. Not only that, but a Devil has terrorized the Royal Courts in every country, bandying about the name “Städal.” The general public is not aware of either of these facts. The rulers of each Kingdom, however, have given orders to their top scholars that they are to discover the cause of this increase in demonic activity,

and answer the most pressing questions presented by the current circumstances:

Who is “Städal?” Can demons be permanently exterminated? Is there any way the almost-certainly coming demonic catastrophe be avoided?

The scholars have a reason for looking to the Graves to answer these questions. Until now, every other Grave besides Fire and Ice has been found, and at each of the others had been a stone slab engraved with ancient runes.

“ðī eīdʒ əv ðə ʃæ, doʊ kɪŋ ˈkænat bi ʃɔr ˈstald— ‘The Age of the Shadow King cannot be forestalled.’ That’s what it says.”

“Hey, everyone! Come over here!”

The grave site is lined with large holes, wherein magical flames flicker and spark, lighting up the whole cave. Scraggly and pockmarked as the volcanic stone is, they can’t even be said to fulfill their apparent function as the “walls” of the grave—any sort of impact would send the whole structure crumbling.

Graves of the Ancients appear to be like the altars found in cathedrals. All have been found to be surrounded by large stone slates, as tall as doors. The scholars have been examining dozens of these stone slates, engraved as they are with ancient runes. Mimilie, however, had been looking over a small slate, only a fourth the size of the others.

At her side and assisting her in the work is her husband, Kaurus Hel. Kaurus had accepted a work assignment at Harré, a request that had asked for sorcerers to come and assist scholars in their survey of the ruins.

“Please bring me the slates found at the other Graves of the Ancients.”

At Mimilie’s request, several men carry over slates brought here from the other Graves. Magic doesn’t work on the slates; they must be carried by hand.

“It looks like the slates fit together to form more runes. The order must be...Earth, Lightning, Air, Water, then Fire, so it comes out like this.”

Mimilie ties her dark brown hair back, then arranges the slates on the ground in front of her. The other four slates had been found by scholars at the other Graves, and they had discovered in their previous investigations that the slates

would fit together, forming sentences from the runes written on them.

The runes told of the Sin committed by the Ancients, all those years ago. It had been thought that when all of the slates were joined together, a way to eliminate all demons would be revealed. Only these five, however, appeared to be needed in order to read all that was written. Each slate was in the shape of a rhombus, carrying a slice of the message. Upon joining the five slates together, the designs on the outer edges fit together perfectly, confirming that the combination was true.

“I shall read it out now.” Mimilie traces her fingers along the grooves and edges of the runes.

“We have committed a grave Sin.

For peace can be banal,

Banality can be suffocating,

And suffocation of the soul

Is but another name for madness.

We spilt our blood on banality

And so consumed each other.

To we who knew not fear,

At us were fangs most fearsome bared.

The seed sown by us

Bears now a sinister hue.

The Age of the Shadow King cannot be forever forestalled,

For his name is Städal.

Oh beloved Ice, sleeping deep beneath the sea,

The key to his destruction lies within you.”

“‘Städal’! It’s written right there!” An old gentleman with a great white beard points to the slate.

“Just as we feared,” Mimilie says. She turns away from the slates to look at the scholars gathered around her. “The legends of Genesis may in fact be true, which means the First Demon truly *was* created by the Ancients. Everyone, what are your opinions on the matter?”

“If ‘Städal’ is the Shadow King, then we can assert he may also be the ‘demon chief’ that strange Devil spoke of.”

“But what does ‘beloved Ice’ refer to?”

“The ‘key to his destruction’ must be Ice-type mages. In the Ice-type Guardian Spirit incantation, isn’t there a line about summoning the ‘Key of Eschaton’? Are not ‘destruction’ and ‘eschaton’ synonyms?”

“If only we could find the Grave of the Ice Ancient...”

“I have heard of demons across the continent as being weak to ice spells. Perhaps those rumors are true.”

“There have been reports suggesting that demons *fear* the power of Ice-types and have actively sought out and killed them, leading to an even smaller number of Ice-types in the modern era.”

“Based on what is described in these glyphs at the end, the power of Ice is necessary to destroy the demons. The runes around this glyph can also mean to ‘gather,’ or ‘absorb.’ This one means ‘to break,’ or ‘rupture,’ which means...”

“The demons might be trying to *absorb* the power of Ice to a degree that her power is *ruptured*, leading to the annihilation of all Ice-types...?”

Mimilie had been quietly listening to the conversation between the scholars and the other researchers. Upon hearing this last implication, however, her brow furrowed with worry, and she stepped away from the group.

Seeing Mimilie separate herself from those around the Grave, Kaurus follows after her. He sees her trembling back and embraces her, arms wrapped tight around her waist.

“Calm down, Mimilie.”

“Yes, yes... I need to calm down.” She sighs, and shakes her head. “When our little girl told us she wanted to work at Harré, I had no idea what to say to her.”

Kaurus remains silent, listening.

“I knew instinctively that—no matter what she or I might want—her magic type would be affected by choosing to work there. Even knowing that it might be dangerous, however, I just wanted to let her do what *she* wanted to do. I wanted her to live out her dreams in this wonderful world of magic.”

Mimilie recalls that moment when Nanalie, still very young, had come up to the two of them, full of hopes and dreams and declared, “*I want to be a receptionist lady!*” She’d been so happy to watch her daughter grow up to become a talented receptionist, achieving her dream—but she’d also grown to worry a good deal more about her only child.

“I met Her, you know, deep in the sea. She encouraged my little trysts with you in that Sheeran bay. It sounds incredible, I’m sure—but I *did* meet Her, in spirit and power, even though She no longer had a body.”

Mimilie holds her husband’s arms tighter against her waist, thinking back on when, long ago, she *left home*.

Her words had been clear as crystal: “*I, too, wish to be with someone on land. There is a hand I wish to hold. Even if he and I no longer possess our original forms.*”

So saying, She had granted Mimilie’s wish and turned her into a human. But She, who lacked a vessel for her soul, had done so in exchange for Mimilie allowing Her to reside in her womb. The trade was made, and Mimilie and Kaurus had finally been able to be together.

Mimilie regrets none of what she did.

“I always believed that if She had a Grave, then surely the Others did as well. I’ve always been the curious, adventurous sort, of course, but that’s why I became an archeologist—I wanted to travel the world to find the other Graves. After all, She—”

“She knew demons would terrorize this world once more, right?”

Kaurus knew this story, having heard it before when he had led her away from her home.

“I searched and searched for any other way besides using Her power, Ice’s power, but in the end, in the Graves were written only confessions of the committed Sin.”

Mimilie recalls that when Nanalie was born, she had felt *something else* leave her body as well.

The power residing within her daughter would surely become necessary in the near future. But once that power was used and gone, what would happen to her daughter?

“If the others find out the truth about Nanalie, she’ll be drawn into the battle against the demons. Before that happens, we should go back—”

“Everyone, run! The volcano’s freezing over!”

Several of the scholars that had been working outside the cave come running inside, foreheads dripping with sweat.

“The volcano is *freezing over*?” Several of the people inside peek their heads outside the cave mouth, only to find icy plains as far as the eye can see, as if the Season of Distant Skies itself has suddenly and completely blanketed the world around them. Covering the land is not snow but *ice*, creaking and cracking its way up into the cave, edging towards the Grave.

Kaurus took one look at the strange ice spreading out before them and grabbed his wife’s hand. “Mimilie, we’ll talk later! We’ve got to hurry back to Nanalie—!” He tries casting a levitation spell to send them flying to the borders of Doran, but that’s when he realizes something even stranger.

“I can’t...use magic?” Kaurus stares down at his right hand, dumbfounded.

“What? Why?” Mimilie asks.

Kaurus incants the spell once more, to no effect. Not even a flicker of magic slips from his fingertips.

“*Karomagia Zohon!*... I can’t summon either! What’s going on—whoa, my body—”

The Grave itself is freezing over. Unable to forestall its advance, all those within the cave can only scream and shout as the ice creeps up their legs.

All of the spell-flames Kaurus had cast to illuminate the cavern go out with a *poof*. At the same time, Kaurus begins to show signs of anemia. Unable to use magic and dizzy from the chill stealing through his blood, he collapses onto the ground.

“It looks like *they* are far cleverer than we had thought them to be.”

Glaring out at the frosty world beyond the cave, Mimilie hugs the fallen Kaurus tight against her chest.

My Third Year as a Receptionist Lady: The Tournament, Part Two

The schedule of events for the third day changes. The matches that *should* be fought on the platforms, floating up in the air in the center of the stadium, are instead being fought on the stadium floor, because the floating platforms aren't working properly for some reason.

If they aren't fixed tonight, tomorrow the next round of fights will be carried out in the same place. Most of the spectators, while disappointed at the minor inconvenience, are just happy that they've not been canceled. I smile as I hear their excited chatter when they come to buy today's tickets.

"The fourth match!"

Today, a bunch of people are *again* scrambling all over each other to push inside the entrance. Well before the match starts, we've already made a good deal of money. Right before the fighting begins, however, the crush of people lets up, and we receptionists are again on standby duty, waiting for any mid-match stragglers who want tickets.

The match begins.

Ms. Pidget and the other two Court receptionists who were working competitor reception the first day are working with the teams on the field again today, verifying the correct teams are fighting, arranging upcoming matchups, and marking down when teams fly "assist flags." *They certainly are moving around a lot more than we are.*

Assist flags are special flags teams are allowed to fly once, and once only, in today's or any of the upcoming fights. The twenty flags all have different effects on the match, and were selected by the teams in the order they arrived at the floating sphere yesterday.

The effects of the assist flags are all different. For example, if your team suddenly is at a tactical disadvantage relative to the opposing team, you could

use a flag like *“Stop time for your opponents for ten seconds,”* or one that allows you to summon a *“helper.”* They all allow teams in a tight spot to escape danger, and the fact that they all have different effects means that each of the matches from the third day on is always bound to have a surprise.

Harré arrived third yesterday, so they picked their assist flag third. The first had been the Knights of Doran, *not* those of Vestanu. *I’m really hoping our Guild team can knock Doran’s Knights down a peg or two. In fact, I really just want them to be the champions.*

The announcer’s voice coming out of the simager is, just like yesterday, full of pep.

While it’s not the most likely matchup, there is the possibility that Harré will be fighting the Knight’s Order today.

Only the team names for the first four matches have been announced so far, and we won’t know if they’re fighting each other today until right before it happens.

The fourth match happening on screen right now is being fought between two foreign teams. For this match, competitors only fight mages of the same magic type. The giant clock-like display board floating above the stadium indicates which types of mages are fighting where.

There are three bouts for each match, with two types fighting per bout. Should the symbols for Earth and Lightning appear on the clockboard, those two types from both teams work in pairs for their match. All team members fight once per match, and the first team to secure two bout victories wins the match.

“The winners of match four are the foam of the sea, *Lost Avantio!*”

Each bout goes on until one side is no longer able to fight, and healing magic is forbidden during the matches.

“Now for our next match, number five, the competitors will be—”

Being unable to use healing magic means the key to *winning* a fight is inflicting as much damage as possible while keeping your own injuries to a minimum.

“Harré’s Guild for Sorcerers versus the Royal Order of Knights of Doran!”

“What?”

On the clockboard, the matched teams’ names are written: “HARRÉ” and “THE KNIGHT’S ORDER.”

“Whaaaaat?!”

“The matchups are done automagically, right? So it’s not like anyone *planned* on them facing off today. Still, it is a little crazy to make those two teams fight each other this early in the tournament... They’re both ranked really highly.” Mr. Yakkurin frowns slightly. “I wish they’d do something to fix that matchup system of theirs.”

This is insane. To think that they’d actually be matched up on the first day of team battles? If they lose now, they can’t go on to the next match...

“Let’s get started! For the first bout!”

No matter what *my* feelings are on the subject, the match is going to happen.

“Lightning and Wind!”

Lightning and Wind. That means Ms. Köln and Ms. Moldina will be fighting two of the men from the Knights team.

The Harré team uses a combo attack: tornadoes charged with lightning bolts are sent hurtling right at the enemy, aiming to knock them out of the fight. They manage to push their way across the field, closing the Knights into a corner—but before they can land a finishing blow, the Knights are jeered into action by their comrades watching from the sidelines: “Oi, you two laggards! Aren’t you supposed to be *men*?” These words, and their implied meaning—two *men* shouldn’t be losing to two *women*, heaven forbid (ugh)—spur the Knights into action, and they forcefully fend off the Harré team’s assault, turn the tide of the battle, and win the bout.

The bout lasts as long as either team can fight, which means that the fighting only stops once my two fellow receptionists are rendered unconscious, fallen on the ground. I see Zozo on the simager screen hurrying over to cast healing spells on them.

“That was rough.”

“What’s gonna happen if *Rockmann’s* fighting in the next bout, I wonder...”

“The next fighter types are Fire and Ice!”

Right on target.

“...”

“...”

Both Mr. Yakkurin and I are speechless.

It’s not like we don’t believe in our guild’s team—in the previous bout, our pair even managed to knock one of those Knights unconscious. One of the commentators had even remarked on the uncertainty of the outcome, saying, ***“Harré is full of talented mages, so it’ll be a close battle between them and the Knights. At this point, I can’t tell who’s going to win.”***

Once he gets involved in the fighting, however, it’s a whole ‘nother story.

“From the Knights of Doran, we have our very own Fire Mage Alois Rockmann, and the Ice Witch Muishia Heldoran.”

The bout is moments away from beginning. From one side of the stadium, Rockmann and a woman I don’t know step out onto the field. The roaring cheers from the crowd are unlike any so far. *The spectators must be proud to see their own Knights out on the field.*

“From Harré’s Guild for Sorcerers, we have the Fire Mage Bandello Dorikki and the Ice Witch Deen Proisis!”

Our team members step out onto the field. Ms. Deen and Mr. Bandello fill the entire screen as they wave to the crowd above. Once the match starts, both of them slowly back away from the center of the stadium in order to assess how their opponents are going to launch their attack.

I really do hope they win this bout.

“Sir Alois—!”

“Give us a win, dear Sir—!”

Other teams are watching the competitors from their seats located at both

ends of the field. I catch glimpses of them in the simager screen, all quiet and obviously full of anticipation for the fight to come. Because the fights kick up dust and dirt every which way while they're happening, a protective charm shield is cast between the field and the spectators. The other members of the fighting teams quickly retreat back to their seats to watch their four comrades do battle.

“Harré is the first to make a move!”

Mr. Bandello disappears from view. *He must've used a Coat of Many Colors spell.*

Rockmann and his teammate, however, haven't budged in the slightest; they're just watching and waiting to see how Harré intends to press the attack.

“That invisibility spell of his is quite good.”

Or so says Rockmann, but he hasn't let himself so much as *blink* as he stares at his opponents. *It seems like he's watching something hovering in the air, near where Mr. Bandello disappeared—the simager can't pick it up, apparently.* Flames swirl in his palms. He summons Yuri, and the instant he does so, he sends balls of fire hurtling right where he's watching.

Mr. Bandello dispels his Cloak of Many Colors and is then hit by the fireballs—or *was it the other way around?* Things are happening too fast for me to keep track. Then he tosses up a charm shield to protect himself against further fireballs that come pelting. *Hold on, why isn't he attacking Ms. Deen too? Is he really that set on not harming women that he won't even fight one in an official duel?* Rockmann's eyes never drift from Mr. Bandello.

Naturally, Ms. Deen is fighting Ms. Muishia Heldoran while all this is going on. Both of them are Ice Witches.

“All the way from the Kingdom of Maljives, Muishia Heldoran graduated with top marks from Doran's Royal School of Magic last year. She transferred to the Royal School at age fifteen, but in the short years since then she's proven herself to be an adept user of Ice Magic, and is extremely famous back in her home country! Plus she's incredibly beautiful!”

“She's fighting alongside my own cousin, Alois! He's said to be an Ancient-

class mage, you know. This is the fight to watch!"

Muishia Heldoran. I'd never heard of her when I was back in school, but apparently she's rather famous in the southern countries. This is my first time hearing of an Ice mage who's famous for their "adept" use of magic, and as a fellow Ice witch I'm rather keen to see how she fights.

"Ancient-class mages" are those with extremely high levels of magic, far beyond the average person's abilities. As far as I know, the only two mages commonly referred to as "Ancient-class" are the Earth-type Mr. Borizurie and Rockmann.

Ms. Heldoran stands in front of Ms. Deen, laughing right in her face as she says, **"I've *never* seen a single Ice mage more powerful than me, or any Fire mage more powerful than Captain Alois. This bout is as good as ours!"** With a proud, haughty look on her face, Ms. Heldoran the Headstrong tosses her dark, waist-length hair to one side and juts her chin out at her opponent.

She definitely has confidence in her own abilities. Perhaps she's never lost to anyone. I don't mind someone having confidence, but what I can't stand is the way she's so condescending. Sure, she's beautiful, but Ms. Deen is super-duper beautiful too. Commentators, you're so biased that you might as well have little horns growing out of your heads. Sure you're not demons? Go, Ms. Deen, go!

Next to where Rockmann and Mr. Bandello are dueling, the Ice-types move to attack. Ms. Deen crafts several spears of ice out of thin air, sending them flying in a random burst of barbed crystal. Muishia Heldoran is undaunted by this volley and freezes the ground around her, creating a protective cage of stalagmites that look sharp as needles.

"Are you alright? Hold on, we'll get you to the first aid tent right away!"

From out of the corner of my eye, I see a woman being carried out of the stadium entrance by one of the Knights. I look away from the simear screen to see that she looks pretty ill. *She's so pale.* "What happened?"

"It appears that she collapsed from anemia, and that healing spells aren't working for her, so I've got to take her to the first aid tent... Hey! Someone! Come help us!"

“Deen!”

“Ah—! Ah...”

I look back up at the monitor. Mr. Bandello is yelling out for Ms. Deen.

“Deen Proisis from Harré’s Guild for Sorcerers has fallen! But perhaps she’s not injured, but just feeling ill...?”

“Goodness me, that looks like anemia for sure.”

Ms. Deen has collapsed in front of the female Knight. *She’d just been fighting her off not ten seconds ago—what happened while I wasn’t looking?*

Mr. Bandello breaks off his fight with Rockmann and runs over and picks her up in his arms. *He must’ve thought she wouldn’t be able to recover on her own.* He carries her off to the edge of the stadium and sets her down gently on the grass.

On screen, I can see the Guild team huddling to discuss what to do next. A minute passes—and then I see Zozo raise the assist flag high.

“They’re going to use their flag!”

Ms. Zozo hands over the white flag to one of the referees. **“We invoke the right to summon an ‘alternate’!”**

“Alternates must be of the same type as the fallen mage. Do you intend to summon someone off the field?”

Harré’s using their assist flag. They could’ve waited until tomorrow to use it, but I guess they’ve got no choice given the situation. After all, if they lose now, they won’t be able to even fight tomorrow, let alone win the championship.

The flag Harré chose is an “alternate” assist, which is the *perfect* flag for this sort of situation, despite how unfortunate it all is.

“I hope Ms. Deen’s going to be okay...” I whisper, worried as I watch the screen. *If she’s feeling anemic, she can’t use magic, which means she was probably forcing herself to stay standing, all the way up to the moment she passed out.*

“Hel, what’s going on with you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re turning transparent!”

One of the Royal Court receptionists looks back and forth between me and the simager. “Ms. Hel—you couldn’t be—”

I couldn’t be what, exactly? I don’t find out, because the next instant I’m somewhere else entirely.

“Harré has used their ‘alternate’ assist!”

Mr. Yakkurin and the two Court Receptionists aren’t anywhere in sight. *What happened to our nice cold cask of tea?*

“GO KNIGHTS, GO KNIGHTS!”

“NICE ONE, HELDORAN!”

All around me are the spectators, staring down at me from their seats. *I definitely didn’t see on the simagers how the crowd was reacting to the fights, but now that I can...gulp.*

I realize that Ms. Deen is right in front of me and looking extremely ill. Zozo’s holding her in her arms. Behind them are Mr. Alkes and the rest of the Harré team, as well as the other competitors in their seats, like Mr. Borizurie and the Knights of Vestanu. All of them, watching me.

“Huh?!”

I find myself sitting down in the center of the stadium grounds.

“The alternate appears to be a blue-haired woman wearing a white uniform! The match shall go on!”

Spectators all around me are cheering—but not for Harré. *Jeering, more like it. Why do they gotta hit me when I’m down?* Dumbstruck, the words of the commentators echo in my ears. *Alternate? Blue hair? White uniform?*

Left, right, I glance around, seeking a woman bearing that description. *Wait, they’re talking about me, aren’t they? I bet I look completely ridiculous, sitting down in the middle of the fight, slack-jawed.* I cringe at the thought.

“Isn’t that Ms. Hel?!”

“Hey—! Ms. Hel! Get up and fight!”

Did someone just say my name? I stand up to get a better look. My eyes dart over to the nearest spectator section. There, standing and cheering for me, are the pharmacist Mr. Petros and his friend Mr. Marco. Old ladies who work my favorite vegetable stalls at the market are there too, clapping and smiling at me. *They must’ve taken the day off.*

“No matter *who* my opponent is, I’ll still win!”

Right when I turn around to see who’s yelling at me, I’m sent tumbling back to the ground.

—*KaSHING!*

I’m kneeling on the ground, holding the *Dare Labdos* sideways over my chest—I’ve just blocked a blow from an Ice sword that took a swipe at me. My mace and the sword *grind* against each other for a few moments as I fight back, making my entire arm vibrate. I can feel the force behind the sword pushing my whole body down into the ground.

“You got some quick reflexes, don’t you?”

While I’d been facing Zozo, the lady Knight Muishia Heldoran had attacked from behind. Her long black hair falls to brush against my face and neck as she glowers down at me. Our eyes meet. I try to push my mace up to gain a bit of space, but then she forces me back down with her sword, leering all the while as if I’m helpless beneath her sword. *Well, this is certainly uncomfortable.* Before I break eye contact with her, however, the dark green gleam in her eyes shifts from merely belligerent to pointedly aggressive.

“Who do you think you are, acting all *familiar* like that with him all the time?!”

Excuse me? Who? What did I do now?

I can’t keep fighting like this. I’d been forced into a kneel by her sudden blow, but I’ve had enough. An explosion of anger rips through me that tenses my whole core—I *can do this*. Slowly but surely, I stand.

This is—this is just—!

“WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON HERE?!” I scream out at everyone on the Harré team. To say that I am “out of place” standing here in the arena would be a *dramatic* understatement.

It’s definitely all because of that damn assist flag. I brace the mace against her sword and, with all my might, parry the blade away before retreating.

GAHHHH! Why?! My breath is heaving with frustration as I shout desperately over at Zozo. She yells back. “Hey, don’t blame me! There are *so many reasons why* the only person we thought could win this bout for us was you!”

“So many reasons?” What kind of reasons, exactly? If it’s because I’m powerful enough to take on Rockmann, why not just say so?! Clearly you were thinking of something else... I glare at all the Harré team members.

My frustration dissipates, however, when I hear Mr. Alkes say, “We all decided it should be you!” *Well, that’s certainly nice to hear.* I give them a reassuring nod. *I’ll do my best.*

Mr. Bandello, who hasn’t yet returned to his fight with Rockmann, holds out his left hand to me. “I’m really glad you’re here to help me out with this.” I take his hand and give it a squeeze, determined. *Wait—is it alright for me to be fighting here? Doesn’t this mean I’ve basically just abandoned my receptionist duties at the spectator entrance? Aren’t I just playing hooky from work?!*

“But!” I yell, “I’m supposed to be working right now!”

“Well if you finish this up quick, you can go right back! Give it your best shot!”

What she’s really saying, then, is that I should “stop complaining and knock ‘em dead!” And I know I’m not imagining that, either—just look at that expression on Zozo’s face!

“Nanalie, behind you!” Mr. Bandello cries out. I sense the threat looming behind me, instantly summon Lala, and all three of us go soaring up into the sky.

I take a peek back at where we’d been standing. Several sharp silver ice spears are stabbing into the ground. *Oh, that would’ve been painful. We would’ve turned into human pincushions had we stayed a moment longer.*

Ms. Heldoran primes up another spell as she watches us fly through the air above her. Next to her stands Rockmann, who had until moments ago been fighting with Mr. Bandello. As I look at him, he looks at me, our eyes locked on to one another. He has a calm, somewhat displeased expression on his face... *Maybe I'm just imagining he's in a bad mood. He usually has that face on whenever I see him.*

Regardless of how he feels about it, my appearance on the field means that now I have the chance to fight him. *Am I lucky to have this chance...? Or horribly unlucky...?*

"Harré, how long you plan on running away—?"

"Go down there and fight—!"

Excuse me? Running away?

"Mr. Bandello..."

"What's up?"

"Let's return to the field."

"O-Okay..."

The angry roars of the crowd pressure us to land back on the ground, standing in front of our two opponents. I shrink Lala, place her on my shoulder, and then thrust the *Dare Labdos* into the ground.

They said we were "running away"—and they weren't wrong. I've got no room to complain if the spectators call us out on what we were doing; in their minds, we were wasting valuable match time that could be spent fighting. Go ahead, say we ran away from the fight: I won't complain, I won't argue.

*But never, **ever**, call me a coward. I have my pride, I have my dignity—and I shall not sit by and do nothing when spectators scream and besmirch my honor.*

"Ha! Run, run, run, as fast as you can, Team Harré! We aren't about to lose to the likes of *you*. Captain, allow me to take care of the Ice-type."

Two versus two. Ms. Heldoran declares her superiority so loudly I'm sure all the simagers are replaying her words right now.

Whoa there, Miss Beauty—you shut your mouth about us ‘running away’ now, you hear?

Rockmann, of course, merely smiles at her overconfidence. “Sure you won’t lose? In that case, I’ll leave her to you.” *Why are they the ones choosing and we are the ones being chosen? Quite a condescending lot, these Knights.*

“Karaza Kionostibas!” (Avalanche.)

In the midst of my irritation, Heldoran sends attack spell after attack spell hurtling across the field at me, as if trying to make up for the time lost to us flying on Lala. *She’s dead-set on making this a one-on-one duel between the two of us.*

Hail speedy enough to pierce my body through pelts down at me. I distance myself from Bandello, whirl the *Dare Labdos* overhead to scatter the ice projectiles—only to be assaulted from the side by a massive wave of snow.

I dodge, but the snow doesn’t stop. It curls and twists into the shape of a dragon, sinuous in the air, charging around to create a polar vortex of chill as it *snaps* and *grinds* its well-toothed maw at my face. But I’m not the type to just sit there and let my head get ripped off by a Snow Dragon.

I place the ring finger on my right hand against my lips. *“Puneuma pagos.”* (Ice Breath.)

I take a half step back and fill my lungs with as much air as possible—then blow it all back out, right at the Dragon. The sparkling ice crystals laced in my exhalation fly fast as a spell from a Wind mage. With just one breath, I freeze the Snow Dragon cold, its every movement stopped as it crackles and creaks there in the prison of my making.

And now, for the finishing touch... I snap. The Dragon disintegrates into a million tiny crystals.

“The Snow Dragon has collapsed! What will Muishia Heldoran from the Knight’s Order of Doran do next?!”

The commentators’ voices had been perfectly clear via the simager, but now that I’m actually fighting myself, I can only catch bits and pieces of what they’re saying.

There are ice shards all over the ground. *Some of these must be from her earlier fight with Ms. Deen.* Blocks of ice materialize at my feet and quickly grow upwards. *She must be trying to trap me.*

My first instinct is to leap away from the ice, but then it would look like I'm running again. *The crowds wouldn't like that. No matter what, I have to make sure I don't make Harré look bad here.*

"Braggiarms Megisto!" (Strongest arms.)

I brandish my arms about, slamming my fists hard against the frozen ground.

—Ka-boooooom!

The ice and the ground itself cracks open. I send my magic racing through the blocks of ice, readying for my attack. They multiply in size, rippling in waves as I send them crashing after Ms. Heldoran. She's sent flying to the edge of the arena under the force of my assault—but she's not knocked out. From the way she pushes herself back up on her feet, however, I can tell that I've injured her, if only slightly.

I'm not about to go easy on her just because she's a woman. Perhaps that may sound cruel to some, but she intended to kill me with that last attack of hers—I've got to be prepared to unleash similarly lethal force. But why did she look so intensely aggressive when we were facing off with each other, anyway?

Whatever. Sorry, girl, it's a bit cheap for me to do this when you're injured, but before you can cast another spell— I twist my fingers, causing the ice threads I've laid into the ground to twist around her in turn.

"What are these?!"

We can't have you casting any more spells. I send my ice threads twisting around her thumbs, her forefingers, and all the others as well, trapping and freezing them in little ice cocoons. The tentacle-like threads slipping and curling around her extremities appears to trigger some deep fear in her, sending her moaning and screaming. *Hmmmm...* I send several more threads to her head, weaving together to form a multi-layered gag that'll prevent her from incanting any spells.

That should do it. Blades and heat aren't going to cut through those, that's for

sure—I learned that thread spell directly from one of Harré’s Master Ice Sorcerers.

“Whatever could this be? In just moments, Heldoran’s been rendered totally immobile...”

“With her fingers frozen and unable to cast magic, she might as well be knocked out...”

“Ah, we’ve just now received new information on the Harré team: the blue-haired alternate woman is Nanalie Hel. She graduated the same year as Alois Rockmann—he was the valedictorian, and she was the salutatorian.”

Whoa, there. I just heard something really nasty.

“Ngh!”

Distracted, I don’t have time to avoid the projectile that slams into my right side. I fall to the ground again, this time flat on my back.

“Ouch ouch *ouch...*” I cradle my head in my hands and look to see what just hit me. It’s none other than Mr. Bandello himself.

“Oh no! Mr. Bandello, please hang on!”

I’d been so focused on my battle with Ms. Heldoran that I haven’t been paying any attention to how the Fire-types’ battle was progressing.

Mr. Bandello doesn’t look like he’s getting up any time soon. Out of the corner of my eyes, I see Rockmann paying me no mind at all as he hops on Yuri and flies over to where Ms. Heldoran is trapped. Seems like he’s worried about her leg injury. Is he such a playboy that he’d abandon a fight to get his hands on her?

Since Mr. Bandello doesn’t seem like he’s going to be recovering anytime soon, I decide to take him back over to where my Harré colleagues are watching. Once I see that his cheeks regain a bit of their natural flush following some healing magic performed by Zozo, I head back to the center of the stadium.

Rockmann appears to be trying to free Ms. Heldoran from her ice threads by melting them. The flames he sends spiraling around her don’t seem to be

having much effect, as expected.

“You won’t be able to get her out of there by doing *that*.”

“These *are* quite durable, aren’t they? I hadn’t thought you’d lose to her, but look—there’s not a scratch on you! You’re rather durable yourself.”

“Without healing magic, even a ‘scratch’ could be fatal. Anyway, I’d never let anyone carve me up like a bunny-bird at dinner.”

At some point he apparently gives up on trying to cut through my threads. He steps away from her to face me. *I may have defeated her, but unless I knock him out too, I haven’t won the match.*

“Sir Alois—!”

“Don’t let Hel beat you—!”

To literally no one’s surprise, there are a lot of aristocrats rooting for Alois up in the stands. Their voices are *particularly* loud in my ears as I stare at him.

That said, they aren’t the only ones cheering. “BEAT HIM UP, NANALIE!!” My whole body feels a bit lighter as I hear some of my commoner friends shout my name.

We’ve had this relationship for almost ten years—I don’t know if ‘relationship’ isn’t the right word—but no matter how you describe this, we’ve definitely been involved in each other’s lives for a long time.

“At last! The time has come for me to OFFICIALLY CRUSH YOU!”

“You *do* know that the *loser* is the one who usually says something like that?”

“Shut up, dummy.” I put a finger under my eye and pull downward to creep him out, sticking out my tongue for good measure. *Look at me! I’m you, dummy!* The whole gesture is practically instinctive at this point. *Nobody does this better than I do. Nobody.*

Without warning, our fight begins.

“*Froga!*” (Blaze.)

“*Nipas!*” (Blizzard.)

Countless fireballs come flying at me, met with my ice boulders. Explosions all

over the place.

I freeze his seemingly unlimited supply of fireballs; my ice is destroyed. I use a magic circle to open a yawning pit beneath him; he sends massive fists of fire to grind me into the ground. A thick charm field of pure *heat* traps me, making me feel as though I'm about to be charred to a crisp. I try freezing him solid and shattering him to smithereens—but he's predicted my every move, and melts my ice with a magical flourish.

Why? Why am I always stopped just before I can finish him off?

Rockmann pulls out that familiar long golden staff of his, thrusts it into the ground and yells: "*Froga Drakohn!*" (Blaze Dragon.) A red-blooded dragon spewing flames from its mouth materializes above him.

Ha! I'm not about to cower before that. I cast a magic circle of my own. "*Kristalo Drakohn!*" (Frost Dragon.)

Flaring out from the bottom tip of the *Dare Labdos* is a silver magic circle that grows to cover half of the stadium. Out of the shining light of that circle emerges an enormous crystal dragon with beautiful white wings.

The dragons growl and flash their wings, snapping and chomping in attempts to shred each other's throats. My Frost Dragon lunges to crush Rockmann himself but is repeatedly blocked by its fiery opponent. Within moments, both Dragons have crushed each other under a mutually destructive barrage of blows.

I feel my face twisted into an expression of pure bitterness. *How in the world am I gonna knock this guy down?*

"Selmokrasfia!" (Absolute Heat.)

Rockmann turns his palms to face the sky and little balls of light swirl into existence. Behind him, blue and purple and black and green, all mixed together, is something I've only seen in textbooks or history books, something that looks like *deep space*.

The heavens with that conjured *space* spin clockwise, and flickering fragments of light flow from it to Rockmann's palms, collecting and growing larger and larger, tossing up a building wind that grows stronger with the size of the light.

That is one of the most, if not the most, sophisticated spells in all of Fire-type magic. While I've studied other magic types' unique techniques, I'm not completely sure how destructive it'll end up, but there's no doubting the fact that it presents an obvious danger to me. Power enough to burn me a million times over, leaving not even a trace of ash behind.

The only thing I can do against it is use that Ice-type spell. If he wants to play this game, well, I'm not about to back out now.

"Apolito Miden." (Absolute Zero.)

A dark night sky wraps itself around me. The glittering stars above me begin spinning faster and faster, fusing to become one brilliant point of blue light, growing larger and larger.

"Alois Rockmann: he's not only the Royal Mage of our Kingdom of Doran, but also Captain of the Order of Knight's First Platoon...and yet she *persists* in resisting him. Could she be—?"

"She herself would be worthy of the title 'Ancient-class.'"

Suddenly, Rockmann stops moving. He, unbelievably, dispels his magic—looking lost, even.

This is it—this is the best opening for an attack that I could ask for. But...why doesn't it feel right? My brows furrow with suspicion as I look around. I can't explain why, but my eyes are drawn to where Ms. Heldoran remains trapped on the ground. Those threads may not break easily, but that doesn't mean they're unbreakable—I should probably strengthen them to prevent a two-versus-one situation.

But something's off about her too.

"Muishia?"

Rockmann follows my gaze to look over at her. He runs over to Ms. Heldoran, patting her cheeks in an attempt to rouse her.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's gone anemic."

She's so pale. I cancel my spell as well, agreeing to an unspoken truce with

Rockmann as I hurry over to where she lies.

“Whatever could have happened? They dispelled their attacks at the same time...ah, we’re hearing that Muishia Heldoran has fallen.”

“The atmosphere inside the whole stadium has been odd for a little while now. Several more cases of anemia have been discovered among competitors and spectators alike.”

The commentators’ words send the stadium into a frenzy of whispers.

I *snap* my fingers, and the ice threads disappear. Gently, I ease Ms. Heldoran down to lay on the ground.

“The ground’s cold,” Rockmann says. “Put her here.” He gathers Ms. Heldoran in his arms and lightly touches his hand to her forehead, beginning a healing spell.

“Ms. Heldoran’s gone anemic as well? Don’t you think that’s too many people at once?”

I kneel down next to Rockmann and tell him that even before Ms. Deen from Harré’s team had gone anemic, I’d seen on the simager screen several others who’d fallen from the same affliction. He seems like he’s already heard this from the other Knights—but still, he looks concerned as he watches Ms. Heldoran.

She looks just as pale as she did before he started healing her. She looks like she’s in pain.

“Ms. Heldoran? Are you—”

“Ah... Oh my...that feels better.”

Ms. Heldoran notices who it is that’s peering down at her—me—and grabs my hand. I press her cold skin against my chest, trying to warm her up. Slowly, she starts smiling a bit, looking a bit more lively than before. That aggressive look she’d had on her face is now completely gone, but its absence just makes me worry more.

“It’s strange,” she whispers. “I wonder why.”

“Rockmann’s healing magic is probably helping you feel better,” I say.

She shakes her head. “It doesn’t *feel* like healing magic. When you—” her eyes focus on mine “—when you held my hand, I felt like I could *breathe* again.”

“What?”

“It’s true,” Rockmann says, “look, her skin isn’t so pale anymore.”

A faint blush returns to color her pale, nearly blue cheeks. *He’s right—she does look somewhat better than she did moments ago. Still, I can’t be the reason for that. Rockmann’s healing magic must’ve kicked in at the same time she held my hand.*

“No, it can’t be *me*,” I say, letting go of her hand. Strangely enough, Ms. Heldoran grows pale again. *How can this be?! I take her hand once more, but this time, her condition doesn’t improve. So it was just a coincidence after all. Hold on, where was her hand before? I held it close to my upper chest, somewhere near the base of the hood on my uniform. Could that be why...?*

No, it can’t be...can it? I remove the hood from my uniform and wrap it snugly around the back of Ms. Heldoran’s head, like a pillow.

“That feels nice...”

Rockmann looks up at me, sharply. “What’s happening here?”

“My uniform is called the ‘Dress of Nullification.’ It nullifies any spells that are used to attack the wearer...”

Oh, that’s right: I was wearing this the whole time I was fighting her—of course I’m not injured. Did I cheat? Was the only reason I beat her was because I had this on? Ugh. I feel awful.

With a quick flick of my fingers, I change out of my Dress of Nullification and into my normal, comfortable blue dress. Gently, I lay the Dress of Nullification over Ms. Heldoran.

“If the Dress is what’s causing her to feel better, what could it be nullifying?”

Rockmann narrows his eyes at my question.

“Come here.”

“Huh...?”

What's that voice? I'm not dreaming, I'm not even asleep. The voice that's caused me so many restless nights recently reverberates inside my head.

"What's the matter?"

"I...I hear a voice."

"A voice?"

The very instant Rockmann speaks, a *screeching* sound ricochets around the stadium. All of the spectators and competitors cover their ears with their hands and squeeze their eyes shut against the horrible noise. *It's not going away*—The stadium itself is shaking, no, *cracking*, like there's some great earthquake.

"What's going on here?!"

"What, indeed... Something's trying to break through the barrier surrounding the Isle."

Rockmann lets go of Ms. Heldoran's arm and places his golden staff against the ground. A magical circle appears, one that will strengthen the barrier. I keep my hands clamped over my ears as I watch him, beads of cold sweat dripping down my face.

Something's going to break through the barrier? Is he talking about the defensive charm shield around the stadium?

His eyes are focused at some point in the air high above the stadium.

Isn't that the place we were supposed to fight the matches today? But we couldn't because of some problem with the magic powering the platforms?

"It can't be..."

"What's that black stuff?"

The sky above the stadium is covered with a deep black mist. A white light, a light that's *thicker* than lightning, is attempting to pierce the defensive shield surrounding the stadium. *That's what's causing all the shockwaves.*

"Captain! It's going to break through!"

"Alois, run!" I hear Prince Zenon yell from his seat up in the aristocrat section.

"The more magic you use, the more I am fed. Resistance is futile." The low

voice of a man echoes throughout the stadium.

“Hel!”

“Ahh!”

Rockmann yanks my arm and holds me tight against his chest. Right then, the shield is broken with a *BOOM*, and to the center of the stadium falls something like a meteorite. Its impact kicks up a cloud of dust, sending me hacking and coughing. Rockmann seems to have covered Ms. Heldoran with his right arm, and me with his left, all to keep us inside a small spherical shield he’s casting. He’s still holding his staff in his right hand.

“Couldn’t we have avoided getting hit *without*—”

“Ice, my Lady, I’ve finally found you.”

Standing there in the cratered earth...is *someone*.

“Count Huey,” Rockmann mutters.

“Doctor...Aristo?”

His eyes glow a dark crimson. *It truly is Dr. Aristo.*

“My name is Städal.”

When that name slips from his lips, all of the aristocrats stir with whispers and murmurs.

“I am the King of Demons, I am the Beginning of them all; I am the God your Ancients created.”

“God?! What the heck is that thing saying!”

Städal. I’ve heard that name before. It’s the name that the demon said when it appeared inside Castle Doran.

Some of the aristocrats succumb to panic. They shout, scream, and shake.

“Long have I waited for this body of mine to be restored to life. With the magic all you Humans have brought me, however, my waiting is at an end.”

I hear the creature’s words, as before, not so much in my ears as I do in my mind itself. *Hmm, “the King of Demons” was “created by the Ancients.” Is it*

referring to something like what happened in the tales of Genesis?

...No, that can't be. That was just a made-up story. It was a legend attempting to describe something that happened thousands of years ago, based on not a shred of actual fact. Right?

"What have you done with the Count's body?"

Rockmann stands up and lets go of me and Ms. Heldoran. Cool, calm, and collected, he asks his question. His voice, while *calm*, has something else to it. There's this low, blistering *rage* undercurrent to his tone, a tone he's never used with me. I'm not even the one who's being asked that question, but I cringe a little bit away from his intensity.

Why is the Doctor here though, anyway? And why are his eyes glowing like a demon's? His voice, too—it's the same as the one in my dreams. The Doctor's body slowly floats up into the air, looking down upon us from above.

"What have I done? This man has been enthralled by the power of the demons for many years...and has been my dearest assistant."

"Your assistant?"

"It is but a trifle for me to control those who have fallen into my temptations."

From what it sounds like, Dr. Aristo first made contact with this...*thing*...a long time ago. Details aside, it's clear that he was tempted, fell into temptation, and had been possessed in the intervening years.

Dr. Aristo must have been completely absorbed in his demon research. Surely, he was fooled by his simple, pure desire to know more. Or at least, that had been the case in the beginning.

"Heavens above, what is going on here?"

"It's clear the old man just got a little too into his research, yeah? He's practically drowning in it."

"Director Lockett, Commander—"

The Director, who'd been up in the spectator stands, and the Knight Commander, who'd been one of the commentators, come up to stand behind us. The Director tells us that only Ice-types in the stadium have been overcome

with the strange anemia. She'd come over to see me out of concern, it seems.

The Knight Commander stands next to Rockmann and places a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry I didn't notice what was happening sooner."

Rockmann says nothing in return. He *can't* say anything—of all the Knights, Rockmann was the closest acquaintance of Doctor Aristo.

Doctor Aristo is a talented researcher famed throughout the land. He must've gone looking for all those demons that appeared in the courts of the high and mighty, wielding the power of speech to the terror of all those who heard them.

That demon that I saw inside the palace—it had looked unconcerned, despite being surrounded by enemies. Confident, even. Had it gone everywhere, looking for trouble?

I wonder, though: had Dr. Aristo already made contact with it by the time it showed up in Doran?

"I shall lay claim to a great, unbeatable power, and none shall resist my authority. All those creatures and beings that have greater power than myself shall be exterminated. As a test, I had this man discover how I might rip away magical power from humans, and he has succeeded most marvelously." An eerie cackle rattles out from the Doctor.

The demons must have known.

They must have known that within that boundless curiosity the Doctor possessed lay an opening for weakness. One wrong step, and he could be used as a weapon to threaten humanity with his knowledge.

"Two years ago, a man was assaulted in the forest to the east. A few days after he was discovered, we performed an examination, only to find slight traces that he'd recently suffered through a bout of anemia. Was that the Count's doing?" Rockmann asks Dr. Aristo...the Demon, his face utterly expressionless as he raises his eyes to calmly ask his question.

Two years ago. There was that incident of a man being assaulted in the East Forest, wasn't there? His name was Gouda Krain, and he'd managed the ranch associated with the Vegetarian Wolf. Satanás and Benjamine had found him out there wandering in the woods... If Dr. Aristo was the one responsible for that

incident, then this demon calling itself “Städal” must think of that man’s assault as one of his little “tests.” Just as Rockmann predicted.

Hadn’t Zozo told me that Dr. Aristo had advised the Knight’s Order on how to deal with the whole Gouda Krain incident? They couldn’t possibly have imagined that the one advising them had committed the crime himself...

“R-Rockmann?”

“What?”

“Are you...alright?”

How can he remain this calm, despite everything going on around him? He couldn’t have known what kind of state the Doctor was in until just now, when he appeared before us.

I recall that night when I first met the Doctor, and how friendly he’d been with Rockmann. *He’d practically been like a father to him. To Rockmann, the Doctor isn’t just some random man off the street.*

“I have no time to speak at length with you, Human. Beyond this floating island, I have already annihilated every living creature on this continent.” The Demon pauses. *“Annihilated, I say, but truly all I’ve done is use the Ice power I’ve collected to freeze them solid.”*

All those people up in the stands who’d been just quietly sitting and watching everything unfold in the stadium below them erupt in shouting chaos at this revelation.

“Did you hear that? The whole kingdom’s frozen over!”

“Ahhhhhhh!”

“What about our families?!”

“What in the name of the Goddess is going on here?!”

People are screaming in horror as they realize the situation that they’re in.

Because this stadium is floating in the sky, it is possible to see the Kingdom down below if you look. I can’t see very well through the cracked fissures in the stadium grounds, but it’s obviously all ice below us. *This isn’t a joke. No one*

would do something so horribly unfunny. And it certainly isn't an illusion.

Didn't it say, "every living creature on the continent?" That means everyone in the Kingdom is frozen, even my mother and father, both working so far away—

The Knights and Palace Guards cast attack spells at the demonically possessed Dr. Aristo, but each and every bit of magic is broken before it can reach him. Not only that, an identical spell is sent flying right back at the caster.

"What reason have you for this atrocity?"

The King slowly descends from the aristocrat's seating area above. Guardian Knights surround him completely as he asks his question of the enthralled Dr. Aristo. Despite the presence of many other royal families in the stands, it is he who takes the initiative to interrogate the interruption. Prince Zenon hurries to float down next to his father.

The Demon laughs again at the King's question.

"With this power of Ice I have gathered, I shall resurrect dear Ice herself, and make this world my own, under my power. None shall interfere with me or my doings, and only those that obey me shall walk this world."

I imagine I hear the distinct sound of several people around me *gulping* in fear at the Demon's words.

"Heed my words: this continent is no longer yours. Using magic against me would be unwise. The more you use, the more my body absorbs. Hand over that daughter of Ice over there, and I shall refrain from releasing my demon beasts and keep you alive, but know you shall be my slaves until the end of your days."

From up where he floats in the sky, Dr. Aristo—I mean, Städal—slowly descends and stretches out a hand towards me.

"Within you I see a radiance most beautiful. You are my dear Ice herself. Should that power become mine, I shall need nothing more. Had it not been for that strange Garb you wore, or this bastard's incessant protection of you, I would have had you sooner. Fire brat—"

"You don't shut up, do you?" "No time to talk?" Don't make me laugh. You're the one talking the most here! Unable to take it any longer, I growl in irritation

at Städal.

“Nanalie!”

Before I can move, Prince Zenon shouts my name, calling me to a halt.

I watch Rockmann’s face as he stands next to me. The image of him as a little boy flashes through my mind, with that lonely, sad expression. *He may not show it, looking at this possessed Dr. Aristo—but there is no way that he’s feeling calm right now.* I decide to ignore Prince Zenon’s warning to be silent and speak my mind.

“Give back Dr. Aristo,” I growl. “Give me back my mother and father!”

I am furious. *This isn’t funny.*

The Demon is after someone wearing a “strange garb” and being protected by Rockmann. “Daughter of Ice” must be referring to the person lying on the ground, with my uniform draped over her—Ms. Heldoran.

The reason that this Demon is collecting the blood of Ice mages, the reason it wants to resurrect the Ice Ancient—it *has to be so that it can eliminate any other being with power. If it can truly resurrect the Ice Ancient, and the legends of Genesis were true, then that means this demon called Städal already possesses the ability to resist the five other types. If he obtains Ice as well, he’ll be able to resist them all. It’d be practically invincible. We can’t let that happen.*

“I’ll never let a vindictive grudge of a spirit like you steal away all the people who are important to me!” I use attack spells to send spears of ice hurtling at Städal. I can’t let Dr. Aristo *himself* die from my attacks, so I aim for the arms and legs to keep him from being fatally wounded.

I thought the Demon would spin my attacks around and send them back towards me, but they slip right through its defenses and leave cuts on the Doctor’s limbs. The Knights and Palace Guards notice this. They look at me, full of hope.

“Again! Again! AGAIN!” Shouts of encouragement rain down on me from the spectators’ seats above.

“Mwahahaha! You’ve got spirit, daughter of Ice. To the fools filled with foolish

blood who spun the spells, not knowing I was absorbing the power all the while: know that the blood of Ice is precious beyond all you can fathom, even flowing within your foolish veins. I cannot abide to let you keep that blood from me.”

Städal floats up into the sky once more, and a black tornado begins spiraling above us.

It’s going to attack us with that, isn’t it?

“Hey, Rockmann! What’re you doing! You can’t leave Ms. Heldoran alone! It’s aiming for her—”

“No.”

Rockmann stands in front of me, his back turned against my indignance. “It doesn’t want Muishia.” He readies his golden staff, pointing it up at Städal. Scarlet flames blaze up in brilliant glory against the dark storm swirling above us.

What’s he doing, trying to protect me like this? I try yanking his arm, but he remains firm.

“It wants *you*.”

The entire world is bathed in scarlet light, and all I can hear is Rockmann’s voice.

“Protect the King! Knights and Guardians, engage the enemy in battle! Use as little magic as possible!”

With those words from the Knight Commander, the attack on the demon horde begins.

The earlier burst of light hadn’t been a magical attack, but a blinding distraction from the demons Städal had magicked into the stadium. Everywhere I look, there are demons: some with sharp fangs, some that are small and nimble, and yet others that are like little animals, each pushing through the barrier overhead and all drawn to the mayhem inside the stadium below. Städal itself floats high in the air above us, looking down upon me and my friends as if it’s watching the most amusing show in the world. *Huh, would you look at that? All that big talk earlier, but it hasn’t attacked us directly at all.*

“Get your uniform back on, quickly. This is no time to be worrying about Muishia when *you’re* the one being attacked.”

I got fed up with doing nothing while Rockmann protected me, so I decided to fight back-to-back with him. While I’m whacking every oncoming demon with the *Dare Labdos* and sending them flying, he tells me to put on my uniform. *I guess that would be a good idea—I need some protection here. Plus, that thing won’t be able to siphon away my magical power if I’m wearing the Dress, so I’ll be able to use as much magic as I want. The hood itself should be enough to protect me, based on how it affected Ms. Heldoran when I put it on her—I look over to where she’s lying on the ground, but I see neither hood nor Dress anywhere on her. Gone. Completely gone. When did that happen?!*

“My uniform’s not there!”

“It’s not there?”

“The uniform I put on Ms. Heldoran has totally disappeared, all of it...”

Where did the hood go? Did it catch on someone’s foot in the middle of the scramble and get dragged off somewhere? I look closely at the ground in every direction, but it’s nowhere to be found. Search and search as I may, I spot no sign of that distinctive white hood and uniform. *I’ve got other things to worry about.* The demons are relentless in their onslaught, and I’m focused on making sure my mace connects *firmly* with their creepy little faces.

“Dammit,” Rockmann swears, “I should’ve grabbed it earlier. Städal must’ve known about that uniform’s ability, and spirited it away during that burst of light.” He looks around at the others fighting nearby. “The Commander told them not to use magic, but it seems like that’s much easier said than done...”

Many of the Knights and Guardians are restricting themselves to using their swords and staves to fight off the demons, but there are also a good number of them battling the demons using the attack spells they’re accustomed to. *Looks like Städal wasn’t lying when it said that the more magic we use, the more it’ll absorb.* One by one, the magic users find their feet trapped in ice, powerless as they watch it creep up their body and freeze them solid. Even a fighter wearing the garb of the Knights of Vestanu is frozen solid.

If we keep fighting like this, we’ll never beat these demons. I clasp the *Dare*

Labdos firmly with both hands and lift it high in the air—only for Rockmann to place his hands over mine, preventing me from moving. *Hey! What's the big idea? If we don't get rid of these demons as soon as possible, we'll never make any headway against Städal!* I shake off Rockmann's hands and thrust the tip of my mace into the ground. I incant the spell for an exorcism circle, waiting for it to appear—but nothing happens.

"I can't cast magic circles anymore?! How the *devil* is it preventing me from doing that! Quit—pissing—me—off!"

"It must know what the Count knows, to be capable of that."

The magic circle Rockmann had tried to cast earlier hadn't been *broken*, per se, it had just been prevented from manifesting.

"Alois! I'm going to toss up a defensive shield so no more demons can come inside the stadium! Force them out!"

"I shall assist you as well."

The Knight Commander and the Director come up to us in the middle of the battle and order us to expel as many demons as possible from the stadium. By now, the Royals themselves have begun fighting alongside their servants and Knights. *Even the King must have decided this was no time to wait for others to protect him.*

Commoners are engaging the demons in battle as well, but here and there are poor people having their necks feasted upon by the monsters. *I wish I could use a healing spell to help them, but I'm not good at healing magic. Still, I can't let that be any reason for me to just watch them die.* I step away from Rockmann's side and head right for the crowd of defenseless commoners. *Using magic is the only way I'm going to pull this off.* I whack away over half the attacking demons with my mace, and send some ice vines speeding towards the rest, ensnaring ten of them. I dangle them up in the air, freeze them solid, and shatter them.

"Thank you," I hear, "you saved us," but all I can think about is that lone little girl crouched crying next to one of the fallen as they lay in a growing pool of their own blood, a man who may perhaps be the girl's father. *He's breathing, but only barely. If he bleeds anymore, he'll die for sure. I may not be good at healing magic, but I have to try.* It's right at that moment when—

“I’ll take it from here.”

As I’m readying a spell, someone taps my shoulder. It’s a friendly face—my old nurse from school, in fact.

“Nurse?! You were here all this time?!”

“I was watching up in the stands, but clearly this is no time to be ‘spectating.’ Nanalie, make sure you don’t use too much magic. Just because we’re inside a charm shield now doesn’t mean that your magic won’t run out.”

The school nurse frowns as she notices more people freezing a little ways away from us. *More and more people are freezing. Thanks to the Commander’s shield, the demons have stopped coming inside, but those that are already inside still need to be taken out. It’s not safe at all.* A massive amount of the creatures are still roaming about inside the stadium. *If the Commander keeps using his magic to preserve the barrier and to defeat the demons, he’ll collapse for sure. The Director said she’ll help him as long as she can still move, but how long can the two of them expect to last against the horde?* Fortunately, there’s a good number of sorcerers around fighting as well, so the demons *are* decreasing, somewhat. *But how long can they keep fighting?*

Time passes. How much or how little, I cannot say—only that, eventually, Mr. Borizurie of the Knights of Vestanu is the one who at last kills the final demon, splitting it in two with his sword. All grows quiet. I’ve no idea what time of day it is, nor do I have any way of knowing; the sky at some point turned completely red. It could be midnight, it could be dawn.

“Commander! Please, that’s enough!”

“I’ll take over! Get a grip, Grove!”

The Knight Commander’s been casting the charm shield the entire time. At the center of the field, he is surrounded by his fellow Knights and gently laid to rest on the ground. Slowly but surely, I see that tell-tale transparent crystal steal up his legs.

Prince Zenon and the King run over to him. *He kept using his magic until not a single demon was left inside the shield.* The Director’s taken over for the commander and is now focused on maintaining the magical barrier. Around her

stand Mr. Alkes, Zozo, and even Ms. Harris. *She must have come down from the spectator seating sometime during the fight. Ah, it's so good to see all of them safe.*

Safe as they may be, beyond the translucent barrier of the shield growl countless demons, wailing and gnashing their teeth as they fix their evil eyes upon us. My brow furrows with worry as I assess the fight still to come.

"Nanalie!"

"Thank heavens you're safe!"

"Nikeh! Maris!"

Both of my friends come running across the field towards me. I gather them up in my arms, holding them close. Out of breath, they relate their own experience of the battle: Princess Mislina had been protecting both of them, and once some talented Knights had formed a protective phalanx around her, they'd gone searching after me.

"Hey! Everyone alright?"

"Yo! Y'all okay?!"

Benjamine and Satanás find us all gathered together and let out a big sigh of relief to see that we're safe. *I'm glad to be with the four of them at a time like this.*

"Ice mages! What the hell are you doing down there! Charge out from behind that shield and fight!"

"We were told before that your powers would work on those monsters!"

"Do you intend to watch us all die?!"

Several VIPs from the palace, likely all Ministers, are shouting at us Ice mages from behind protective ranks of Knights, pointing towards the demons waiting outside the shield. *"Ice mage" this, "Ice mage that"—look around, people! Do you see many others here?* No other fellow Ice-types I know are still fighting—they're all collapsed on the ground, like Ms. Deen is. Normally, you can't tell whether someone is an Ice mage or not simply by looking at them; which naturally means that I, as the last Ice mage to reveal her type in the fight

against Rockmann, become the focus of all their shouted urgings.

“Th-That *thing* said if we hand over that blue-haired girl that it wouldn’t hurt us, did it not? We should just hand her over to the demons and get the situation here under control! We must ensure our safety!”

I am singled out by a thickly-bearded Minister garbed in obviously expensive clothing.

Well sure, you could do that, but you can’t exactly guarantee anyone’s going to be safe after you do so, right? If only Ice magic works against that monster, you shouldn’t be offering up your Ice mages as bargaining chips! Come on, we should be thinking up ways to squash Städal, not offer me up to it.

I take a step forward. *If they want me to be their sacrificial lamb, they’re gonna hear me bleat a bit before I die*—a big hand stops me in my tracks. I look down at where someone’s grabbing my arm. It’s Rockmann. *Wasn’t he standing much further away from me a moment ago...?* The recent past repeats itself, and I am once more made to stand behind Rockmann as he protects me.

He glares up at them. His voice erupts from somewhere deep within him, a rough roar kept in check by that rocksteady composure of his: “Hold your tongues, dotards.”

His back is turned to mine, so I can’t tell what sort of expression he’s got on his face. The Ministers, though, all go completely pale, as if they’ve just been cornered by some terrible beast. *It’s settled, then: Rockmann’s voice is definitely scarier than any demon’s growl. No doubt about it. The Ministers sure feel that way, at least.*

But why does his tone make me feel so uneasy?

“Screw you old bastards! You wanna make *her* jump outside the shield? I’m gonna knock out *your* dumb asses before I take on those demons, you got that?!”

“You said it, Naru!”

Satanás and Benjamine pull me over to where the Director and the other Harré employees are gathered. Behind me I can hear what sounds like Maris and Nikeh chewing out the Ministers for even *suggesting* I be handed over to

Städal. *Oh. I feel like I'm going to cry.* "Sorry for the trouble," I say to Benjamine.

She smiles. "Don't worry about it!"

Satanás gives me a little poke on the side of the head to snap me out of it. "I've got an idea." He pauses, waiting for Rockmann, Nikeh, and Maris to catch up to us as we're walking away. Once we're all gathered together again, he starts off again: "As long as we don't get rid of that *boss* demon—" he points up at Städal floating up in the sky "—we'll never make a dent in the hordes down here. We've got to risk going outside the shield to knock it down. For that, we'll need—"

"I'll send half of the Knights out with you."

At some point, Prince Zenon had joined our conversation. Behind him stands Mr. Borizurie, as well as several other Knights, all listening in.

Benjamine's eyes go wide at Prince Zenon's offer. "You really think it's alright to send out *half* the Knights with us?"

"We don't have time to debate this. We're getting weaker the longer we fight, all of us. The only option left is an all-out assault." Prince Zenon lifts his eyes to glare up at Städal, an expression of grim determination on his face. That's when I realize what's going on in his mind. *As Vice-Commander, he's in charge of the Order now that the Commander's collapsed.*

Rockmann nods his head. "Using our magic against the demons at random, with no strategy at all, will only lead to *that thing* taking our power for himself. We have to beat it at its own game," he says, full of confidence.

Maris, however, isn't convinced. "But our enemy has taken the power of all those it froze, has it not? Can we *really* hope to succeed against the combined magical powers of every human on the continent?"

Rockmann winces a bit at her words, but isn't cowed into silence. "You're right. To beat it, we'll absolutely need the cooperation of every single Ice mage still standing. The rest of us will serve as decoys to distract the other demons while Ice-types are launching their attack on Städal. It's the only way we can defeat him."

He gives commands to his subordinates for every Ice mage in the stadium still

capable of inflicting damage on the demons to be brought before him. *They're all we've got. Or rather, we are all they have available to defend against the demons.* In the middle of organizing the attack on Städal, Rockmann commands Maris to keep protecting Princess Mislina. It is there that we split up, and our little circle of friends is broken.

Everyone's summoned their familiars. *With them, we'll at least be able to move around the stadium. Whether we'll be able to pull off this attack, however, remains to be seen.* Once more, I hop on Lala's back.

Zozo taps me on the arm right as we're about to lift off. "Nanalie, here—I'll lend you my uniform. Put it on."

"But if I do that, then *you'll* be in danger!"

"I'm staying inside the shield with Alkes and the others to keep them safe from the other demons. *That one—*" she looks up at Städal "*—that one I leave to you. I'm counting on you, Nanalie.*" With a *snap* of her fingers, my dress and her uniform switch places.

Zozo's uniform is a bit different from my own. It consists of a pair of short white pants, low-heeled boots, and a long-sleeved tunic. As I see her waving about her arms, fluttering her—my—dress's long loose sleeves, I can't help but laugh a little at how odd the sight of her wearing my clothing is. She laughs at me as well as I adjust the sleeves a bit to better accommodate the fit I'm used to.

Rockmann said he wanted all the Ice mages to gather together here, but Ms. Deen and Ms. Heldoran are already beginning to freeze over. They won't be able to help. All of the Ice-type sorcerers that had fought in the earlier matches had already used up their magic. *None of them can move either, frozen to the ground as they are.* One Ice mage each from both the Knights and the Palace Guardians is brought over by Prince Zenon to where I'm standing. *Including me, that's three of us. I feel like that is, to put it lightly, nowhere near enough power to take on Städal.*

"Don't get upset," Rockmann says, smirking down at me. "I'll be there to protect you whenever you need me."

"I don't *want* to be protected by you!" *Dang it, it must be obvious how uneasy*

I'm feeling about all this.

“You scared? Freaking out? Doing alright?” Rockmann continues to tease me.
I am not freaking out!!

I let out a big *huff* of frustration, then refocus on the task at hand. Around me I see others are assembling in preparation for the upcoming assault.

Mr. Borizurie isn't going to be joining us. “I'm staying inside the shield. Once she hits her limit, I'll take over casting it.” He nods at the Director, looking ready to begin casting in case she should collapse. “There are only three Ice-types still standing,” he says, patting my shoulder. “This whole situation is nothing at all like we planned... In the end, it looks like it's going to come down to you and your Ice magic.”

“In the end it comes down to me?” Hmm, well, that sounds nice, but aren't there two other Ice-types coming along with me? What about them? Rockmann said that Städal was specifically after me, but I can't imagine that really being true.

Prince Zenon picks up on my misgivings. “You've got a *lot* of magic in you, Nanalie. Enough to make it worth it for *that demon up there* to go after you, enough to bear the title ‘Ancient-class mage.’ No one here doubts that.”

“But I'm not nearly as powerful as Rockmann, who had so much he struggled as a—oops...”

I realize in the middle of my conversation with Prince Zenon that I've said too much. *Shoot! I was supposed to hide the fact I learned all that stuff from Rockmann when he turned little. If he finds out now, all our efforts to deceive him will have been for nothing!*

Rockmann doesn't seem to notice anything odd about what I've just said, however, and merely continues to face Prince Zenon, who just sighs at my response.

“I suppose it's not the strangest thing in the world that you yourself wouldn't notice how powerful you are—but do you remember back when Alois would always blast his magic on you? Do you know *why* he brawled with you like that?”

“You’re talking about our fights at school?”

“Looking back, don’t you think it’s strange? Isn’t it odd that a noble-born boy would hit a girl and burn her hair? Not very ‘noble’ at all, is it?”

“...”

Well, he’s certainly right about that, but why bring it up now?

“From the moment your hair changed color, everyone around you was able to see that you’d one day become far more powerful than the average mage. At the time, your body was just too small to contain all that power, so it leaked out into your hair and your eyes, changing their color.”

“But—but that’s—”

“Call it brawling, call it arguing, whatever—what you two were doing by going all out with your spells was preventing each other’s magic from exploding out of control. This is Alois we’re talking about, right? He knew the problems that came with having too much magic inside a person. Thinking about your fights now—can’t you see?—he was draining your power, little by little, to prevent it from overflowing.” Prince Zenon tilts his head slightly to one side and smiles, as if remembering something. “All the teachers probably knew what he was doing. They would’ve stopped you otherwise.” He shakes his head. “Whatever the *reason* may be, I didn’t stop you two from fighting because, well, he seemed to be enjoying himself.”

Okay, Rockmann definitely heard all that. So why isn’t he reacting?

“Is that true?” I ask him.

“As if you could believe all that,” he says, rolling his eyes. “Who’d ever do something like that because they enjoyed it?” He glares over at Prince Zenon. “Keep your wild speculations to yourself, Your Highness.”

I mean, sure, I guess it would be odd if someone “enjoyed” fighting like that...but didn’t we start doing it only after I found out my magic type? He hadn’t done anything more than tease me in the six months before that.

After my magic-type had been revealed, he’d tossed every spell in the book at me, bringing me to my boiling point at every chance, whether that was in class

or outside of it. *I got so angry, so pissed with his stupid antics so many times, especially when we were younger, but I never had a pestokraive happen while I was at school. Was that because of all the fighting we did...? Had he done all that on purpose...?*

I look up at him. *No. No way. This is Rockmann and me we're talking about, right? As if he'd go out of his way, for years on end, to do a favor like that for me.*

"Um, don't look at me like that. Feels gross."

"Don't call me *gross!*"

"Setting your quarreling aside," Prince Zenon interjects, "we're all exiting from the shield at once. Everyone ready?"

"Yessir—!"

At his command, we mount our familiars and ride them outside the shield. The instant we're beyond its protective magic, all the demons converge on our position, their mouths practically *frothing* with bloodlust.

"*Seriehla!*" (Surging Wave.)

Atop Lala, we twist and turn to avoid the monsters champing at our heels. The great surge of water rushes over them and swallows them whole, letting out bursts of salty spray as it does so.

"Thanks, Nikeh!"

"Don't worry about the shrimps down here! You've got bigger fish to fry!" Nikeh gives me a thumbs up as she flies alongside me, riding her serpent familiar Paula.

The other Knights say the same. "We'll handle it down here!"

And so I and the other two Ice-types fly high, high up into the sky.

"*So you've come to me willingly...*" In the form of the possessed Doctor, Städal laughs loudly at the three of us as we surround him. *Our fight is with you, Städal. But we are also racing against time. The Knights and Princes down below will eventually run out of magic...and we don't know how long we three will last against you either.*

For some time Städal laughs and laughs, and as he does so, a smoky appendage emerges from his back, like some massive hand made of shadow. All three of us wait, watching it twitch, as if expecting the Doctor's body to hatch the rest of the dark creature within.

Out from the Doctor's body emerges a humanoid creature with long silver hair, two red eyes, and a face paler than pale, with one great blue eye embedded in its forehead. From the neck down it is covered in black scales reminiscent of a dragon's. *Other than that, completely like a human. Strange.*

"Ah, we meet at last. You kept me waiting so long."

The voice it speaks with is not the hoarse growl I'd heard in my mind, but that of a young man.

Dr. Aristo's body, having apparently fulfilled its purpose, is tossed aside to fall down to the ground far below without further ado.

"Doctor!"

I urge Lala to go after him, knowing I'll be too late no matter how quickly I hurry—only to see Rockmann waiting beneath the falling Doctor, catching him on Yuri's back. *I'm so glad he noticed what was happening.*

"So *you're* Städal, huh?"

"Surprised? What were you expecting, some great and fearsome monster? Hmmmm?"

Three against one. An unfair fight in any other circumstance, but this guy just sucked up the blood and magic of everyone on the continent. Three feels like it's nowhere near enough.

Städal's long tongue slips out of his mouth, and he slithers it around to lick his own cheeks and forehead. "The power to resist Ice I may not possess, but I shall not be defeated so easily."

The instant he declares this, gale-force winds strong enough to rip our bodies apart begin to rage. Blades of air slice and tear at the three of us, whirling to hit us again and again. Fortunately, Lala crystallized herself just before the attack started, so we aren't careening down towards the stadium. I take the blows as

they come, somehow managing to make it through.

We'd originally agreed to launch a simultaneous attack on Städal once we'd surrounded him. Our eyes meet; I look to the lady Knight Kirina and give her a nod, then do the same for the gentleman Knight Ladd.

"Wahmasha!" (Scouring Arrow.)

Intending to investigate just how hard those black scales of his are, I let loose an Ice arrow. The other two attack at the same time—but our enemy appears to teleport away before our arrows can hit him. I fire off several more. Some miss, but some also happen to hit my target. Where they strike against him, they explode with a *burst* of Ice...and tear off a few of his scales.

Mr. Ladd is the first to notice this. "Our attacks can penetrate his armor!" Städal doesn't appear to be able to resist our attacks—but they also don't seem to damage him very much. "Looks like it's a game to see if we'll be actually able to *hit* him with our attacks."

Ms. Kirina nods. "Creating an opening *before* we attack is likely the best course of action."

The three of us huddle together, bracing against Städal's Wind assault. Both of the Knights emphasize how important it is for us to force our enemy into a momentary window of tactical weakness before attacking.

"We *could* launch an all-out assault," Mr. Ladd says, "but in a situation like this we really need a decoy to—whoa, watch out!"

Bolts of black lightning shred the air between us. Ms. Kirina's arm is burned by the attack. I try using healing magic to fix her up, but the instant I close the wound it opens up again. *What is going on here? Do those bolts inflict wounds that can't be healed...?*

Now I'm really beginning to sweat.

"Oh Ice, how kindly and lovingly you used to smile at me. Find it within yourself to show me that tender smile of yours once more."

"As if I'm going to smile at *you*!"

"Ahhh!"

“Kirina!”

Ms. Kirina lets out a scream that grabs our attention. Quicker than quick, Städal has sunk his sharp teeth into her throat. Before our eyes, her struggling grows weaker, and ice begins to steal up her legs. Lala and I fly over to her as fast as we can—but Städal drops her to the ground. Ladd is close enough to catch her with a levitation spell and sends her floating back inside the charm shield. *Only two of us Ice-types left. We haven't even been fighting that long! I knew it would probably end up like this, but still...just three of us against him already had us at a disadvantage, and now it's looking even worse...!*

“Delicious, oh, DELICIOUS! More. I need MORE!” Städal lunges downwards to chase after Ms. Kirina. He attempts to break through the barrier, but before he can so much as *fracture* it I ensnare him in dozens of my Ice threads. With a twist of my hands, I yank him away from the shield.

“I will *not* let you have her.”

“You *bitch!*”

Städal flexes his muscles explosively, and all of my Ice threads are broken in an instant. Then, he comes after me. *He broke them all...without using a single spell.* I grimace at how easily he freed himself. Whips of black lightning snap up at me as Städal closes in. He lashes out at me, again and again and *again*, but every time, I manage to toss up pillars of ice that bear the brunt of the attack, shielding me from their zapping snaps. With my Ice Breath, I manage to freeze parts of his limbs, slowing the pace of his attacks. Lala takes care to fly just right in order to assist my attacks.

“Consuming *you* first shall suit me just fine, dear Ice.”

Städal glowers up at me, his eyes flashing with threats of cruelty. *Okay, now it's serious: threatening to eat me? Really? Like I'd let you do that.* Two shadowy arms several times longer than I am tall explode out from his sides. They claw left, right, up, down, shredding through the air as if to squish me like a bug, moving far faster than any physical arms could. I dodge once, dodge twice, and resolve to counterattack; with a flick of my index fingers and a few words of incantation, my magic flares out:

“*Amones Fea.*”

Blizzards of snow spiral out from my fingertips, their cold winds coiling through the air like miniature tornados.

WhooshwhooshWHOOSH my spell gains speed and intensity as it hurtles down towards Städal, blasting against the charm shield he hastily casts to protect himself—but my spell is strong. It pierces through his shadow hands to land a direct hit on his scaly body.

“Ngh! Impossible!”

A direct hit, sure—but all I did was throw him off balance. He isn’t falling out of the sky just yet. I notice I’ve made a few cuts in his shoulders. I incant another attack spell to try damaging him further, but he’s too quick for that to work. Before my spells can land, he’s already magicking them away with other types of elemental magic. *Since he has that absorption ability, I’ve only been using minor spells up until now—but I’m never going to defeat him without a major magical attack.*

Städal presses his hands against the open wounds on his shoulder. “Impudent girl! Your puny magicks are no more than mere *irritations*... Enough playing! Now, I shall show you the full extent of my power!”

So saying, he unleashes another bolt of black lightning, but not at me. *What is he trying to do?* I glance towards the bolt’s intended target—there, fighting the demons, is one of my friends.

“Benjamine!”

I instantly try blocking the attack. Just barely, I manage to summon up a massive crystal mirror that reflects the bolt away from Benjamine. *Whew.*

My opponent, however, is not merely standing by while I breathe a sigh of relief; he’s far too cunning to let this critical opportunity slip by. By the time I realize what he’s done, it’s too late: behind me is a malevolent maelstrom in the shape of a dragon, roaring down to engulf me in its maw. *I won’t be able to completely dodge this—but I can’t just let it swallow me.*

I push down hard against Lala’s back, trying to dive us down beyond the reach of its jaw. Something, however, grabs my right arm and yanks me out of the way, and an odd *softness* holds my whole body close.

“Y-You okay?”

“Wh-Why are *you* up here?!”

Rockmann, who should’ve been fighting the demons on the ground, is holding me in one arm and casting a charm shield around us both with the other. The magical barrier prevents the maelstrom from consuming us both. Shockwaves shake the air as Städal’s maelstrom collides with flames blazing out from Rockmann’s shield.

“Infinite Gods Above and Holy Spirits of the Blood, hear my prayer—”

“W-Wait! You can’t—!”

He’s begun reciting the Prayer of the Guardian Spirit.

“In mine own name of Hades, I beseech you:

Blaze incandescent this ground below,

And with flames make red the sky above.

Let the power of every living creature fuel this fire,

That its brilliance may outshine the noon sun itself.

Flaring light,

Burn with all the power of the First Blood.”

A vortex of flame is exploding out from the fingertips on his right hand. *How is he doing this? The Prayer of the Guardian Spirit requires the maximum amount of magical power one possesses. Rockmann’s been casting spells left and right ever since Städal appeared, hasn’t he? He’s used defensive spells, offensive spells—all to keep us safe. And yet, miraculously, he hasn’t collapsed like all the others did. He’s never so much as flinched at using his power. Perhaps it’s because he has so much to begin with? He’s already been outside the shield for several minutes now, using magic all the while, and yet still he decides to cast this spell? Why?*

Rockmann uses his left arm to hold me tight against him as the magic leaves his body. I hear a *crack crack crack*—and look down to see ice slowly beginning to cover the fingertips on Rockmann’s left hand.

“No, NO! Rockmann, please! Stop!”

“*Grenade.*” (Consuming Flame.)

Rockmann does not heed my pleas to stop, and only holds me tighter.

Städal sneers down at the flame vortex, as if to dismiss it as a mere light show—but it ends up being *far* more powerful than our enemy expects. With an enormous *BOOM*, Städal is slammed up into the sky far above the stadium with all the speed of a comet. The spell causes what sounds like an *earthquake*, leading to the collapse of part of the stadium itself.

“Rockmann!”

Yuri disappears with a *pop*! I panic and hold Rockmann tight against me, placing him in front of me on Lala’s back. “Lala! Let’s take him back inside the shield while we can!” He’s still breathing, but only in shallow, slow wheezes. I watch his eyes, slits barely open and listless. In this moment, I am the most terrified I’ve felt all day, even more than when Städal first appeared.

“Sir Alois!”

“Alois!”

We pass through the shield and safely land. Maris, the King, Lady Norweira, and Duke Rockmann all come running over. Carefully, I lift Rockmann off of Lala’s back and lay him down on the ground. He can no longer move his left leg.

Everyone around me is yelling. “Hang on! Alois, stay awake!”

All I want to do is apologize for how pathetic I was while fighting Städal.

He’s always watching over me, always protecting me. Ever since I was twelve years old! I may not have known that’s what he was doing back then, but still—what can I say to him at a time like this?

Why does he do all this for me? I’m not worth it. I’m not worth the effort.

“Why? Why do you always protect me?”

Maris and Lady Norweira are patting Rockmann’s head and cheeks. The Duke, the King, and several wounded Knights are all gathered close around us. I am with Rockmann, at the center of all the attention, kneeling down on the ground

beside him. *Why would a guy so respected, so loved by everyone around him, put himself in such danger to protect me—and not just once, but time and time again?*

I whisper, half to him, half to myself. “If the reason we fought as kids was, you know, to keep our magic from overflowing—couldn’t you have just told me?” Maris and all the others around us look at me as I speak.

“The reason?” His eyes flutter a bit at hearing my words, and he turns slightly towards me. “The reason I saved you earlier was because we can’t afford to lose you now.” I can’t tell what he’s thinking. Despite the pain and exhaustion he must be feeling, he looks calm and composed as ever. “The reason for our old fights...well, I don’t mind if you or anyone else thinks of me...remembers me...as an irrationally violent man. I don’t mind at all.”

I’m curling my hands together into a tight ball of frustration, pressing them against my knees. Rockmann takes his hand—the one not yet frozen—and gently places it atop my own.

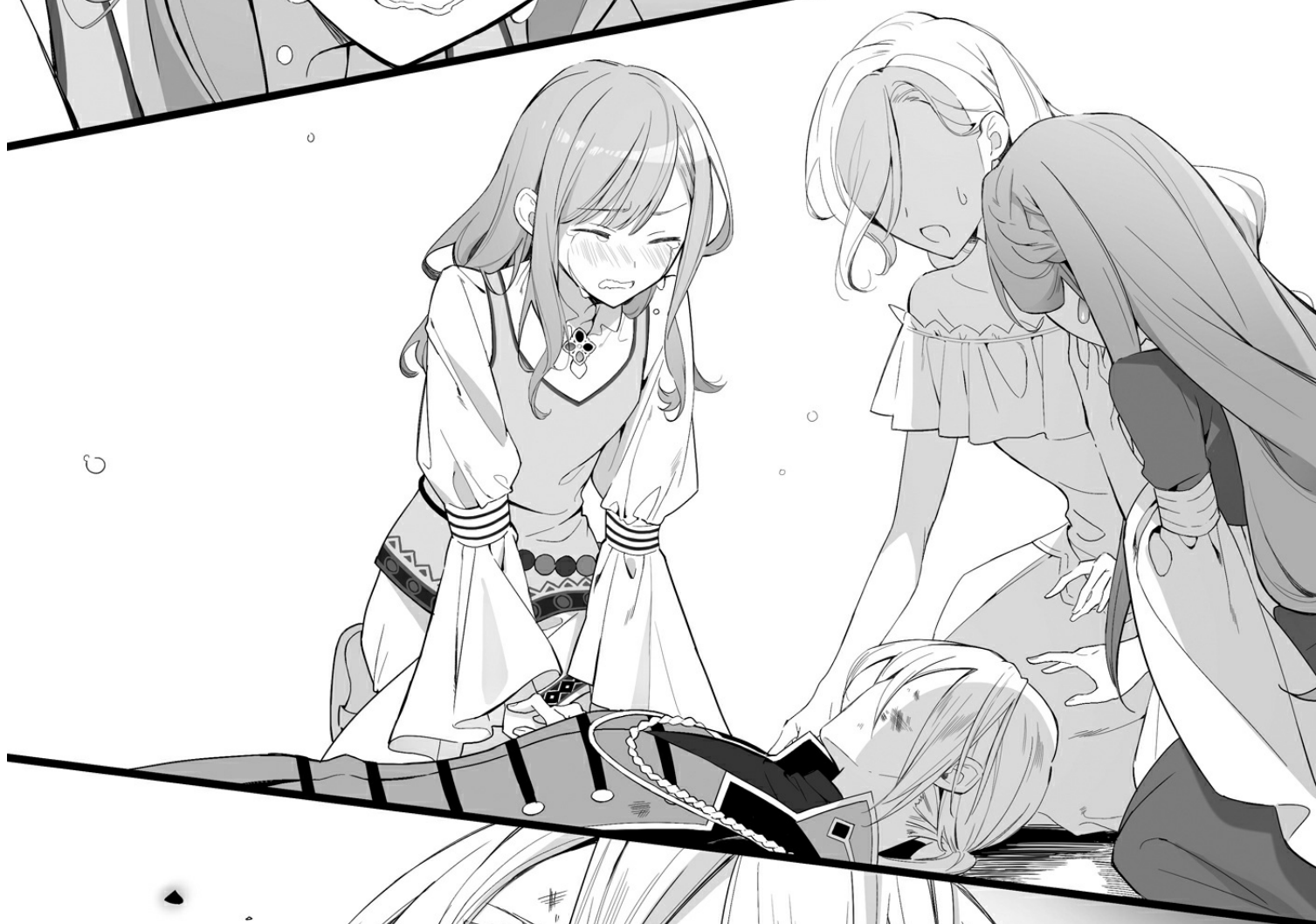
“All I ever wanted...was for you to grow up healthy, without limiting yourself or your magic. I didn’t want you to end up like me. If I’d been too kind with you, the other noble children would’ve given me no end of grief. I’m sure I could’ve done it differently, but I didn’t have many good memories when it came to controlling my magic power...that was the only way I knew how to control it.” He takes a shallow breath before continuing. “We didn’t get along with each other from the moment we met, did we? Guess it was easy for me to do...what I did...without having any other reason or feeling behind it.” He laughs a little, sounding strained.

You aren’t supposed to laugh at a time like this. Look at you! You’re a wreck, but laughing like you’ve not got a care in the world! I feel anger building up inside of me. *A guy like you who tries to act cool at a time like this is just weird! It’s just wrong. Isn’t it?*

“It’s not like you to cry like this. Oh, but I guess you did cry that one time, so maybe you are a crier after all...”

“Quiet, you!” I’m grinding my teeth together as I try to hold back my feelings—but tears drip from my eyes falling down with a tiny *pat* to land on

Rockmann's hand.



“Really, please...don’t cry.”

What’s wrong with me? Maybe I’m the weird one. Aren’t I angry? If I am, why am I crying? Yes, people cry when they’re sad, sometimes when they’re happy too, but angry? Who cries out of anger?

...Maybe I’m not angry after all. And I’m certainly not happy. The only feeling left is sadness. These are tears of sadness.

“I’m sure...” Rockmann’s voice is getting fainter. “I’m sure you hate me.”

“‘Hate’ you?”

“People cry...for loved ones, over friends...not for people they hate. And...you can’t stay here crying. *There’s still something you have to do.*” He presses the forefinger on his right hand against my forehead. “You’ve got a job to do, Crybaby Caretaker of Lost Children from the Knight’s Order. You’ve got a job to do...Receptionist Lady.”

“Wait, Rockmann—”

Quietly, faintly, his arm goes slack and falls to the ground. Bit by bit, his body is covered with translucent crystal, until finally he is frozen entirely.

“NO! Sir Alois! Please, open your eyes!” Maris presses her face against the cold ice covering his body and begins sobbing.

Why is it that every time I stretch out my hand to you, you take it in yours so easily? “You do all *this*...despite how much I treated you as my enemy.”

Not a single person around me has anything to say in response to my whispered words. I’m crying so much that my nose begins to run. My breathing gets shallow and rapid as sorrow threatens to drown me. I let out a sad gasp as I come up for air and look up at the red sky.

“You were a loathsome idiot sometimes, but still, even then—” My eyes begin to well up with tears again as I squint up at nothing in particular. “There was...one thing I liked about you.” *Don’t blink, Nanalie, don’t blink. You can’t cry those tears.* No matter how I try to hold them back, however, I can’t stop them from running down my cheeks. “You always, *always* kept your promises. I liked that.”

I think back to when Rockmann and I first met, and all that's happened since then.

I'd tell him to "prepare to die" before each school holiday. We'd come back to school and he'd say, snarking loud enough for everyone to hear, "I've prepared myself. Now what?" What a stupid joke of a conversation. I remember every time he said that, and how I'd, just a little, smile at his sarcastic response.

Then there was that time when he'd said he "wanted to teach me how to perform psychometry" and dragged me out on that investigation under those pretenses—but then he actually did teach me how to do it, properly. I'd thought of the whole episode as just another example of how condescending he could be. I was honestly surprised back then.

It was the same that time I was held hostage in the Land of the Sea. He said he'd come for me, sure—but I hadn't actually believed he would.

Then, just now, didn't he say—

"I'll be there to protect you, whenever you need me."

"Protect me, huh?"

Why did he say that? Why in the world did he say that? He's got nothing to gain from making a promise like that. Maybe he's even stupider than I am. He might even, you know, be actually stupid. But you know—

My shoulders tremble as I cover my mouth with my hands.

"I—"

—I'd be stupid not to fall in love with you.

For a while my mind goes blank. I shake my head a few times, blinking rapidly. Why am I feeling like this, now? It's strange. It's weird.

In any case, I haven't got time to waste sitting here thinking about stuff like this. It's just like Rockmann said—we've already made it this far. I can't look back now. I've got a job to do, something I need to do. For everyone.

What flashes through my mind, however, is a memory of the last time I cried like this in front of him. Rockmann had lost one of his arms and was covered in blood. That was the first time I caused a pestokraive, wasn't it? There had been

this *image* in my mind while it was all happening, almost like an out-of-body experience. I'd remembered that one time as a child I'd gone with my mother to the town theater. The play had been so boring that I'd nearly slept through the whole affair, but there was one part I remember quite clearly: it was when a woman was weeping over her fallen lover. She'd looked so, so sad, weeping away all that while. But I hadn't made that connection at the time, between my tears and hers—I'd thought I was crying out of frustration more than anything else.

"Why...why couldn't I have realized sooner?"

Could I—could I have already been in—with him, even back then, when he lost his arm?

I peer through the ice trapping him, only to see my own face reflected on its surface. *I look like I'm in pain.*

"Everyone, please! Help me." Still kneeling on the ground, I call out to the others surrounding Rockmann and me.

Mr. Borizurie is the one casting the shield at the moment. The Director had run out of magic and is now lying down next to the Knight Commander. Both of them have their eyes closed and are covered in ice. Zozo, Mr. Alkes, and Ms. Harris are on standby next to Mr. Borizurie, ready to take over whenever his magic should begin to fail. Maris is crouched down next to Rockmann, crying. The King is watching it all happen with a most grave look on his face. I notice that some of the aristocrats who had been standing around us just moments ago have left, probably to fight the demons beyond the shield. More and more, I look around and see not flesh and blood, but frozen people standing, sitting, collapsed on the ground. Prince Zenon himself can no longer move one of his legs.

Benjamine kneels beside me and looks me in the eye. "What do you want us to do, Nanalie?" All eyes turn to look at mine as they await the answer to her question.

"I'm not going to demand you help me," I say, "I know what I'm asking is dangerous. But please, someone—I need you to come with me to attack Städal. I need you to recite your Prayer of the Guardian Spirit."

Stopping him for even just a moment would do. A distraction would be fine. Just enough to throw him off balance, even.

Prince Zenon's the first to speak. "This is the final showdown, isn't it?"

I nod my head.

"Alright then. I'll help you."

"Your Highness! You can't! Look at you, you're already freezing—"

Nikeh, who's been quietly helping Prince Zenon stay standing this whole time by keeping one arm around his shoulders, shouts in protest. *Of course she'd say that; the Prince's leg is almost entirely iced already. If he uses more magic in the state that he's in, well...we can all see, right before our eyes, what'll happen then.* Nikeh looks between the Prince and Rockmann, shaking her head and pleading with her Vice Commander to stay on the ground.

But Prince Zenon remains resolute. Nikeh cries as she argues, *begs* him to stay—and yet he doesn't even acknowledge her words with so much as a shake of his head. "Everyone who can still move *must* go up there to stop him. If we don't, we'll all freeze. It'll be the end for me," he says, looking down at Nikeh, "and the end for you, too."

Even if we do defeat Städal, however, there's no guarantee that we'll be able to return everyone back to normal. With a condition like that, how can anyone command others to choose one or the other? Stay, and die, fight and die. I certainly can't tell people what to do. Some of the Knights begin arguing amongst themselves about whether they'll actually be able to stop our foe if they use their Prayers as I'm asking them to.

"Personally speaking, I think it'd be best for you all to do as the blue-haired maiden says."

"What was that?! Could it be...hm?"

"I" draws the attention of the whole crowd. We look up, seeking the source of the voice. Everyone tilts their heads to the side and frowns at the unfamiliar person speaking to us. Half-doubtful that we'll actually see the source of this odd remark, we all look up—only to see a *most* unexpected character floating above us.

“Prince Maiteiah?!”

“I’ve come to grace you with my presence, Humans.”

“Long time no see, Zenon!”

“Bella!”

There, several yards above us, is Princess Bella from the Kingdom of Seleina riding what appears to be her familiar, accompanied by Prince Maiteiah. *I must say, this is unexpected...in several ways, at that.* My jaw drops as I recognize the two of them. Besides the other five who came to rescue me when I was taken to the Land of the Sea, however, no one recognizes Princess Bella, let alone the *merman* Prince Maiteiah. All of them stand there, staring and speechless.

Prince Zenon waves up at them. “Bella, good to see that you’re safe—but what are you doing here?”

“Under the orders of the Sea King, Prince Maiteiah here came to the capital of Seleina just before the disaster started. He took all the citizens of the city and the members of the royal family down to the Land of the Sea and sheltered them from the ice. Everyone else on land froze over, and the monsters tried to attack them—but the merpeople left the sea to defend them all against the demon hordes! We made our way towards Doran as we helped protect people along the way. According to the Prince, however, his magic can only work on himself once he’s on land.”

Prince Maiteiah levitates himself off her familiar and descends. He comes to rest in the air before me, just barely hovering off the ground. “Essentially, your magicks and those demons cannot harm us, but in turn, we cannot use our magic against them. The fundamental principles of our magic differ too much for us to have any effect on each other, so we are forced to fight the demons with our fists, which is rather a hassle, if you ask me.”

All the Knights and Royals around us are watching them with complete confusion written across their faces. “Merpeople? The Land of the Sea?”

Prince Maiteiah pays them no mind. “Now show me! Where is this *King* of Doran?”

“...Here I am.”

King Zerolight steps out of the crowd. His eyes are wide as he faces the mer-Prince, as if he cannot believe what is floating in the air right before him. A moment passes, though, and he finds his tongue again. “And why, might I ask, has the Prince of the Sea himself come all this way to Doran?”

“The reason for that could not be more obvious. Within this Kingdom lives one whose veins flow with the Blood of the Sea, a descendant of the Sea King himself.”

“A descendant of the Sea King?”

“The Sea King’s daughter once fled the Kingdom, and in some miraculous manner changed her form to that of a human’s. That daughter of the King is my older sister, and it appears that she gave birth to a daughter in this land, or so I heard from my father the Sea King the other day.” Prince Maiteiah turns to me and rubs my head with his scaly hand. “Just as I thought,” he says, “you *are* my sister’s daughter.”

His ‘sister’s daughter.’ If what Prince Maiteiah is saying is true, then my mother is his older sister. But Mom is a human, and even if someone were to try telling me that she isn’t my “real mother,” I wouldn’t believe them; all of my relatives have always said how much I resemble her. She’s got to be my real mother.

Benjamin tries to clarify the whole situation. “So, you’re saying that Nanalie is the granddaughter of the Sea King? Is that correct?”

“It is. This girl is my niece, in other words... Well, since we’re all gathered together like this anyway, perhaps I should take this niece of mine and make her my bride.”

Satanás gags and turns pale at this answer to Benjamin’s question. “Ugh! This ‘Prince’ guy is a gross dude, no doubt.”

Setting all that “bride” nonsense aside, however, I can’t quite believe his story about my mother. The King himself looks at me and asks, “Is this true?”

I hesitate. I can’t say yes, I can’t say no—what can I say? I wasn’t raised in a wealthy household. I grew up in a normal home. Yes, Mom traveled to foreign countries on occasion, but Dad has been working here in Doran all my life. I’d

never even seen the sea until I became an adult. I remember how moved I'd been by the sight of the beautiful blue expanse stretching from the Seleinian shores out to the horizon, waves crashing gently on the sand.

Wait, that's not everything—another memory flickers through my mind.

"Would you mind calling me 'Grandfather'?"

"Ah!"

"What is it, Nanalie? Did you remember something?!" Benjamine draws close to me after I cry out in recognition.

Prince Maiteiah's lips tremble as he glares down at the iced-over Rockmann, practically *spitting* with every word he speaks. "That *unsightly* frozen fool lying on the ground there seemed as though he'd sensed the connection between you and my father."

Don't lie. Don't lie.

"You mustn't lie."

Mom's always said that too, hasn't she? Telling me not to lie. I never have met my grandparents on my mother's side, have I? That's because she basically ran away from home, or so Prince Maiteiah would have me believe. I only know the relatives on my father's side. But that's not unusual, is it? I don't know my mother's magic type either. Not knowing things about your parents in and of itself isn't unusual, though.

Still. If the reason I don't know much about my mother is that, well...

"Listen up, Humans: You've got one chance to attack. It has to be a one-shot kill. Take every last bit of magic you have and spell it against it."

"Huh? Hold on, please—what about my mother?"

"Like you said earlier, the only way to take out a monster like that is with a massive amount of magical power. My older sister was changed from a mermaid to a human by the power of Ice, who had hidden herself for many years in the deep seas. At the time, that power took refuge inside of my older sister, but now that power lives within *you*."

"Within me...?"

This is all happening too fast for me to follow. I force myself to try to understand what he's saying: my mother is actually a Princess of the Sea, became a human using the power of Ice that had been hidden deep in the sea, and after that married my father and gave birth to me. Essentially.

And now that power of Ice is inside me, and that's what Städal has been after all this time. Or so he says.

"But if I'm the daughter of the Princess of the Sea, how could you know that?" I ask the Prince. "The Sea King is said to possess the power to 'see all,' but surely he could not understand all that about me, even with his great power."

"By merely entering the Land of the Sea, he saw your past, your present, and your future, as easily as one would look into a mirror. My sister's life he saw too. From beginning to end, all is proceeding as he has foreseen."

Okay. If I make it out of this alive, I am going to have a lot of questions for Mom.

Prince Maiteiah raises his voice as if to address everyone inside the shield. "Certainly and truly, within this Human girl flows the Blood of the Sea King, and within her resides the power of the Ice Ancient. All those who *can* follow her must lend her their aid. If *that thing* is not stopped here, if it is not stopped now—none shall possess the means to defeat it."

At the phrases "Blood of the Sea King" and "power of the Ice Ancient," the eyes of all those around me are suddenly filled with hope as they look at me.

"She's the granddaughter of the legendary Sea King?!"

"So he's real after all..."

"Does that make her a Princess of the Sea?"

Right on the money, mister aristocrat. But that's not what's important here! Then again, I suppose you wouldn't be willing to go along with my plan if you didn't have some confidence in my abilities. I've got to thank Prince Maiteiah for talking me up to this tough crowd.

"I shall exit the barrier and protect the civilians beyond. Fear not."

"Thank you very much for your help."

Accompanied by those who are filled with hope, I move to the edge of the stadium. Together with me are Zozo, Mr. Alkes, Nikeh, Prince Zenon, Benjamine, Satanás, and five other Knights besides. *This is enough.*

Zozo had volunteered immediately, saying, “If this really is the end, the only choice we’ve got is to fight.” Mr. Alkes had decided to follow her lead and come along with us as well. Neither of them try talking to me about anything that Prince Maiteiah spoke of, only saying to me, quite casually, “It won’t be so scary to die if we’re together.”

Ms. Harris remains at Mr. Borizurie’s side. “I’m staying here,” she says, “I’m going to fight alongside the Knights to protect everyone from the demons.”

Prince Zenon tries to rally our spirits before we take off. “Don’t any of you slip up on me now. I’m counting on you.”

“You got it, boss!” Satanás says, in that same jokey tone he always has.

Zozo pulls me aside to teach me the incantation to turn her uniform invisible. “You ready? It’s ‘*fiisha*,’ okay?”

“Understood.”

“*There’s still something you have to do.*”

“I know. I don’t need *you* to tell me that.”

I hold his last words close to my heart as I soar up into the sky.

* * * *

“Bold as brass, aren’t you all? Coming up here to fight me once more. Stubborn fools like yourselves are nothing but sore losers.” Our enemy, his shoulders still frozen, had been watching all that happened below from his floating perch far above the stadium grounds. Behind him swarm an enormous number of demons, looking ready to launch their assault at any moment.

“Hey, look at this guy—he waited for us to come to him! This ‘Städal’ fellow might not be so bad after all.”

“Naru! Shut up with your dumb joking, please!”

My allies surround Städal and begin reciting their Prayers.

First, Prince Zenon:

*“Infinite Gods Above and Holy Spirits of the Blood, hear my Prayer:
In mine own name of Zeus, I beseech you;
Cast down lighting from on high,
With your bolts a bridge make between Heaven and Earth.
Thunder resound in the souls of all living creatures,
And let loose cries of lamentation by cutting light into ground.
Show to us, oh Gods and Spirits,
How even Blood may be broken.”*

And then Nikeh:

*“Infinite Gods Above and Holy Spirits of the Blood, hear my Prayer:
In mine own name of Hera, I beseech you;
Flood this land with Mother Fountainhead,
Give birth to this world with her Living Water.
Exalted above all who reside betwixt sky and sea,
Let her sole superior soul, the Water of Life itself,
Become the Blood that flows through and fills
The veins of all living things.”*

Satanás, Benjamine, and all the others also begin reciting their Prayers to the Guardian Spirits. Their bodies begin to glow, flaring brightly once the recitation is finished and the spell activated.

*“Infinite Gods Above and Holy Spirits of the Blood, hear my Prayer:
In mine own name of Perseus, I beseech you;
With the unceasing winds of this Earth,
Wither all life with unstoppable wrath.
The shapeless form of their being,*

Every living creature shall know—”

With the uncanny *roar* of an oncoming tornado, a wind begins to blow, as the greatest attack spell each of them possesses erupts out from their fingertips and into the stadium.

“Have I not told you? The more magic you use, the more I shall consume! Your sheer *idiocy* shall never cease to *disgust* me!”

Städal weathers the attacks head-on, as if to assert just how impotent they are against him. *Even when Rockmann said his Prayer, all it did was blast him up into the air. The only wounds I see on him are those that I inflicted earlier. Still, impotent though these attacks may be against him, he’s still struggling to repel them away from the demon horde waiting above him.*

From the very beginning, we’d known these attacks wouldn’t damage him. That’s why our strategy hadn’t been to defeat him with the other elements—all my friends need to do right now is to create an opening, a moment of weakness for me to slip in and attack him with Ice directly. Thanks to them, I can come all the way up to him, reach out, grab on, and cast—

“Absolute Zero.”

“What?!”

I’ve slipped behind Städal’s defense to come at him from behind. I cling tightly to both of his dark, scaled arms, and release the spell. With Zozo’s uniform, I was able to sneak up on him unawares. *This uniform of hers is rather extraordinary. She told me it was capable of completely concealing the wearer’s presence, but to fool even a monster like this...? Marvelous.* I’m not riding Lala because she wouldn’t have been concealed by the uniform, so I’m having to make do by slowly, clumsily pushing myself up through the air via levitation spells. *Success.*

While Städal remains distracted by everyone reciting and releasing their Prayers to the Guardian Spirits, I unleash my final attack on him, a spell that will require all the magic I have left within me.

My friends who have flown up with me fall down to the ground, having exhausted their power. Below, I see Prince Maiteiah and the others waiting

inside the shield, working together with Princess Bella to catch them all before they hit the ground.

Benjamine, Nikeh, Satanás, Prince Zenon, Zozo, Mr. Alkes, the Director, the Knight Commander, Mr. Borizurie, all those Knights...and Alois Rockmann. It's because all of you helped me that I was able to make it this far.

I recall something Zozo said to me while we were working one day.

"Nanalie, did you come to work at Harré because you aspired to become like a receptionist lady you saw working here one day?"

"Yes, I did, embarrassing as that is to admit."

"It's not embarrassing at all! Hey, let me ask you this: what do you think that receptionists really do?"

"What they 'really do'?"

She'd grinned and said, *"They make connections."*

"Make connections'?"

I'd tilted my head to one side, confused. She just smiled at me again before explaining:

"We receive a person's request, and we make a connection. We connect people with each other, connect one lifestyle to another, connect a source of money to a need for money. In the end, our job is all about making connections. Can't you see? The reason you and I are sitting here together, having this conversation, why—it's probably all because that receptionist lady somehow connected the two of us." She'd patted my head fondly, continuing to smile all the while. "Fate can be a funny thing, don't you think?"

That receptionist lady—the Director—had connected the two of us. She had fastened our fates together: hers, mine, and a good number of others'. My father, of course, had been the one who first brought me to Harré, but there is no doubt in my mind: the reason I've made all these connections at Harré, the reason I connected with all my friends back at school, it was all thanks to her.

This time, I want to be the one who makes the connection.

"Y-You bitch! Seek to do the same thing that Ice did to me, do you?! Freeze

me as you will; I shall take your power—I shall consume it! This body of mine is filled with the blood I stole from several Humans, all of whom possessed the pure magic of Ice! I'd thought your power to be hidden away deep within the sea, but a strange twist of fate has brought you here before me! And yet, our meeting was inevitable—for I know just how dearly Ice has wished to see me once more!!”

Creak! Crack! I focus so intently that I feel as though the core of my being may break under the force of my concentration. *He should be frozen over by now. Why is this so difficult? Is it because, like he says, he's absorbing my magic?* My whole body begins to feel heavy and weak. *If the power of the Ice Ancient truly is within me, please, just let me hold out for a bit longer, until I can finish him off.*

“You’re doing fine. Remain just as you are.”

(What was that?)

I'd been on the brink of preparing for my own imminent death—when all of a sudden, I hear the soft voice of a kind lady echo inside my head. The pain and struggle I'd been feeling somehow eases. Städal doesn't appear to find my suddenly calm disposition suspicious, however, and only continues to cackle at my efforts. *Did I imagine that voice just now?* My question is quickly answered when I hear it speak to me again.

“I am the Firstborn of this world, and I bear the power of Ice.”

Along with the sound of her voice, images flash through my mind.

A wide field. Six men and women wearing thin, loose garments. All of them smiling, singing and dancing, looking happy.

The scene changes. *Five are holding hands in a circle, casting a spell on something. In the middle of them all, a little creature like a black dragon—but somehow also like a human baby—takes shape.*

(Is that Städal? Is this an old memory of hers?)

After that, I see the five often taking good care of the baby, in their own ways—but there is another who watches him even more than the rest. She, a woman with white hair, is the only one who did not take part in Städal's birth. The

woman holds him in her arms, sunlight shining down on them both. A small shard of ice materializes in her hand, and she gently presses it against the baby's cheek. Most likely, she is the one future generations shall call the Ice Ancient.

The scene changes once more. I am standing in a grassy field, and before me I see the Ice Ancient and a red-haired man kissing. If their hair color signifies their magic type, he's probably the Fire Ancient.

From far off watches Städal, who has now grown to have the body and mind of an adult. The glare in his eyes, the expression he has on his face as he looks at them—as he looks at the Fire Ancient—is terrifying. Even without words, I can tell he hates him.

Another scene change. Städal has crafted demons with his magic. They are strange creatures, likely things only he can create. They are neither mischievous nor malevolent. He seems to have summoned them only to prove his strength to the Ice Ancient.

But even with this show of force, she does not fall in love with Städal. Eventually, he uses his demons to attack all five of the other Ancients present. The woman in my head speculates as to why he does so. "He attacked out of loathing, out of jealousy of the other five, and knew he possessed the power to withstand their abilities. No longer able to control him, I gathered all my power to freeze and destroy him."

Since all I had seen so far had been described in Genesis, I had guessed at how this story might end. "Despite my efforts, however, he was not utterly defeated. Years later, the shards that had been scattered across this wide world became conscious, and transformed into creatures unthinkably alien."

So Städal had been in love with Ice, then. But his love was broken, and despite her tender affection he grew to resent her, to the point where he lashed out in violence against all the Ancients.

"Hundreds of years later, humans and the other animals were born. Power was granted to them, but the demons sought to steal the power of Ice I possessed, and so it was thought I should be hidden away. I, the woman called even now the Ice Ancient, had my soul and power sunk to the bottom of the

ocean. To depths of the sea so dark and far, no demon would ever trouble my sleep. I was given to none other than the first Lord of the Sea, Celestialea."

I suddenly *feel* the blood in my body begin to seethe. My hands grip Städal all the tighter.

"What's this...? You come inside me, even without my consuming you! Ah, I understand, you must have missed me dearly, O Ice."

"Do you not know, beast, that you are freezing over?"

"That voice—Ice!"

A voice only *I* should have been able to hear now appears to be audible to Städal as well. *The spirit of the Ice Ancient must be leaving me and entering Städal, flowing out with my magic.*

"Annihilate thyself. Even if I cannot ensure your sundering is eternal, know this: this age, of this world...it is not yours."

"Oh! Dear Ice of mine! Around and around I feel you race inside of me! To think that *becoming one* with you should bring me such pleasure and comfort! Ice, darling Ice of mine—let us rule this world, you and I! We simply need to vanish away all those creatures that would seek to come between us, isn't that right, my darling Ice?"

"Yes, you're right. Shall we vanish, then? Together."

"Ahhh, what sacred bliss...!"

His voice still raised in exaltation of Ice, Städal is, at last, totally frozen over. He cannot speak, he cannot move. Petrified in solid crystal, his body merely hovers there in the air.

My whole being feels weak, as though my very life has been sucked out of me. Yet, I am not done; I lift my shaking right hand and press my thumb and middle finger together, ready to *snap* destruction.

"Nanalie."

With her kind voice, full of affection, the Ice Ancient calls my name. Even until the very end, however, I never see any trace of her with my eyes.

“A long time ago, Städal took all those who inherit the blood of Ice and cursed them, so that they could not bear children with any other who had inherited the blood of Fire.”

“I can’t...have children?”

“But after one thousand years, that curse is beginning to lose its power.”

I cannot see her, but I feel a chill breath against my forehead.

“Please, do be kind to him.”

And with those words, I hear no more. I close my eyes. Slowly, I snap my fingers.

With a million *clicks* and *cracks*, the vanquished Städal crumbles into fragments of ice; a million tiny icicles shower the ground like falling stars.

All my power gone, I tumble with them, down to the ground below. There’s not a single island floating in the air above me.

It’s the first time I’ve ever seen such a sky.

The Sorcerer's Receptionist: "I Want to Be a Receptionist in the World of Magic."

I feel as though I've been sleeping for a very long time.

I sit up, as if to proclaim to myself and the world that I can sleep no longer. When I open my eyes, however, I look around to see not my dorm room, nor my old room at my parent's house, but a *space* that could only exist in dreams. I blink several more times to ascertain if I'm actually awake.

I'm lying in a soft, fluffy bed that a commoner like me would *never* be able to sleep in. Flower print paper covers the walls, in which are set a large window and a door leading out to a balcony. Fine curtains hanging halfway over them both sway softly in a gentle breeze. There's a dressing table embossed with gold, atop it a mirror. A large, two-person sofa accompanied by a small table to one side is also here. On the table rests a vase, holding a single couplet flower.

My eyes drift back to the bed. I'm wearing white silky pajamas. I notice that there's this *weight* resting on me, somewhere around my knees. I'm so drowsy that I hadn't even noticed at first; but lying there—with the most *adorable* expression on her face—is my friend, fast asleep.

* * * *

"A whole *month*?!"

"Yes, you were asleep for a whole month, dear; we were all—I was so worried —!"

I'm still rubbing the sleep out of my eyes when Maris, who's just woken up and lifted her head off of my knees, embraces me with tears in her eyes. She holds me *so tight* it gets a little difficult to breathe. I feel her tears drip down onto my chest as she holds me close.

"Your hair even turned brown! No one could feel any magic left within you, and so we all thought your life was in *terrible* danger! You gave us all quite the fright!"

“My hair turned brown?”

“Well, yes, but three days ago it went back to blue.”

According to Maris, a full month has passed since the day I collapsed in the stadium. I’ve been sleeping all the while, not opening my eyes even once. The Royal Doctor herself had used her healing magic on me, but to no avail. They’d tried so many other ways to wake me up, but all their efforts had been for naught. Time passed on by while I just *slept*. Or so Maris explains, in between snuffles.

The room I’m in now is not inside a private home, nor is it a room in Maris’s mansion; I’ve apparently been sleeping in a guest room inside the castle itself.

“A little while after you used your magic, what appeared to be glowing splinters of crystal poured down from the sky. Then, when the splinters would brush against those who were frozen over, the crystalline ice covering them quickly began to melt away.”

So under the power of some other spell...the moment those shards fell to the ground, everyone covered in ice came back to life. Is it because he had absorbed the blood of everyone into his body? Following the downpour of light, the demons vanished as well, or so Maris tells me.

“After order was restored, the King rewarded all those who had been courageous enough to fight against the demons. He gave each fighter one million pegalos, as well as granting them each one wish, proportionate to their achievements. Of course, he could only grant wishes that were *possible*, obviously.”

“What did everyone wish for?”

“Satanás and Benjamine were granted a house to live in together.”

“What about Nikeh?”

“She comes from a family of merchants, does she not? Rather than something for herself, she wanted to increase the status of her family, and so they were granted a title.”

“A title?”

“A barony, in fact. A particular domain had been recently vacated by its lord. Her parents were *very* enthusiastic about becoming landowners.”

“That makes Nikeh a *baroness*, doesn’t it?”

“It does indeed, ohoho! I’ll need to teach her the ins-and-outs of high society, and I shall teach them to her well and properly!” Breathless with anticipation, she looks as though she’s just found a new toy.

Zozo, Mr. Alkes, and the other five Knights had all received their one million pegalos. The Knights had all been promoted a rank, and the two from Harré each had their wishes granted. Prince Zenon had wished for nothing in particular, and had taken no money in reward either. Instead, he had suggested replacing some of the Royal Ministers. *He helped me so much in the fight against Städal, but gets nothing in return? I simply can’t stand the idea that he, who did so much for everyone, is rewarded with nothing...*

“Sir Alois, of course, did exactly what I’d expect of him—”

“He’s alive? Maris, is he alive?! Tell me!”

“Y-Yes! He’s alive and well! My darling Sir Alois can’t simply go off and *die*! Oh, goodness, that reminds me—this is no time for us to be having a leisurely chat. I must summon the Royal Doctor to see you immediately!”

Maris hurries outside the room. I can’t help but laugh at the sight of her getting all flustered as she hustles and bustles.

A gentle breeze brushes against my skin. My eyes are drawn to the window; beyond it lies a beautiful garden, and even further out in the distance I see the entirety of the Kingdom spreading out to the horizon. *Just as Maris said, it really does look like I’m inside the castle.* From what I can see through the window, there’s not even a single ice shard anywhere in the Kingdom. The knowledge puts my mind at ease.

I look down at my palms. *I’d thrown all my magic at him with that spell, and it resulted in some predictable side effects. I wonder, though, can I still...?* I whisper the incantation. Instantly, shards of ice materialize in the air just above my palms. I let out a sigh of relief. *Glad to see that hasn’t changed.*

So I’ve been sleeping for a whole month. I’d been entirely drained of all my

magic. Perhaps the reason I was asleep that long was because my body needed to regenerate it back. My hair turned back to blue before I woke up, after all, so that's likely proof enough that I was regenerating magic in my sleep. I pause, realizing something. Isn't it odd to say that my hair "turned back to blue?" My hair's original color is brown. But I suppose now blue hair is my new normal. I like this "normal." I like how I am now.

* * * *

An impromptu party is to be held in honor of my awakening. I *told* them that I didn't want them to do something so grand and ridiculous as all that for *me*, but I'm told that while order has been restored throughout the Kingdom, not a single party nor banquet has been held to celebrate the victory over the demons—and that's all been because I, one of the "heroes," had still been asleep. *Well, I can hardly turn down a party now, given that explanation. Everyone waited for me to wake up before having fun?* I retract the tasteless refusal I'd made and immediately agree to attend the festivities.

Invitations are sent out to everyone in the Kingdom, regardless of noble status. The Royal Isle is full of commoners as the whole island transforms into one giant ballroom. The school is sent floating up into the sky, and the private residences of the Ministers are rearranged to ring the edge of the Isle. Preparing for the positively *massive* party turns out to be quite the ordeal, beyond anything I've ever seen before—and yet, in just a day and a half, everything is set up and ready to go. *It's almost scary just how quickly they managed to figure it all out.*

Today's the day of the party. The Doctor took a look at me yesterday, and she said that while "everything appears to be in order," I should take it easy for a little while, since I've been asleep for a month. This means I'm being forced to remain sitting down most of the time, including right now. Speaking of which, Maris and I are currently waiting backstage for the party's opening ceremonies to begin. A stage has been constructed next to the castle, from which the King is going to address the audience before the festivities formally get underway. Since I've been sleeping for *so long*, I'd very much like to get up and stretch my legs, but I refrain from doing so, mostly because I don't want Maris to worry about me. Quietly, patiently, I sit, leaning against the castle walls as I look

around. Likely because the King's throne is on the stage, not many people are walking nearby. *The throne's not the only thing deterring curious passersby. With those Knights standing guard all over the place, no one's going to so much as even look at me sitting here.*

"Are you quite sure you're alright without a dress, dear? It certainly is like you to dress like that, but still, perhaps the occasion calls for something else...?"

I decline Maris's offer to loan me one of her dresses. While everyone else looks to be dressed up in formal wear, I alone am dressed otherwise; I'm wearing my Harré uniform.

I'd thought it lost forever during our fight with Städal, but Benjamine and Satanás had found it for me amid the ruins of the stadium. Maris told me they'd brought it up to my room, leaving it and a letter lying next to my pillow.

Except for Maris, I still haven't been able to meet with any of those good friends of mine. I haven't even seen my parents. Of course, it'd be absurd of me to expect that everyone would immediately gather together from all across the Kingdom just to come see me, but even so. *There are so many people here on the Isle today, but how come no one's come to see me? Something else must be going on here.* The conspicuous absence of my friends and family isn't the only thing on my mind, however.

"Ms. Hel! Please, do grace us all with a wave!"

"Lady Hel! Thank you for all you did!"

"Hey, Mom, is the Princess up there?"

"ARE YOU REALLY THE PRINCESS OF THE SEA??!"

"Lady! Nanalie!"

"Everyone, please, stay back!"

"Um! Excuse me! Lady Hel! I—you saved me back at the stadium!"

Someone calls out to me from beyond the Knights protecting me. They call me "Lady Hel." *Ooh, that feels weird.* I look to see who had spoken to me. *There.* One of the people I'd seen getting attacked by demons during Städal's assault is waving to me as she thanks me. "You're alive!" I say, smiling. I try

going over to see her, but a crowd of others pushes forward once they notice me.

“Thank you!”

“We’re so glad you’re awake!”

“Lady Hel, look over here!”

The Knights get into formation and prevent them from coming up onto the stage. In the end, I am unable to have a conversation with that first woman who thanked me, and am made to sit down in a seat at the edge of the stage.

What’s the meaning of all this? Why are they treating me this way? It’s certainly nowhere near what I would call “normal.” They’re acting as though I’m a noble.

“The ceremony will begin shortly, Lady Hel. Please remain seated until then.”

I know that voice. I know that face. It’s someone I met when I’d gone out drinking with Nikeh and the others. I get up and look closer to be certain.

“Mr. Drografia?”

“Please do not refer to me in such a matter, my Lady. Whatever is the matter with you?”

“That’s—that’s what I want—”

A great swell of music begins to play; the festivities are beginning at last. *I suppose I need to go back to my seat.* I look left, towards the throne.

One by one, the members of the royal family ascend the stage steps, and slowly seat themselves in the chairs provided for them. The fourth member to come up on stage is Prince Zenon. Our eyes meet, and he gives me a slight smile and nod. I stand to return the greeting. *Ah! Good, his legs are moving like they should again. There’s not even a hint of injury to his gallant gait.*

From every direction, I hear the joyous cries and cheers of all the people of Doran who have gathered together on the Isle to celebrate today.

Despite the festive atmosphere, I’m still locked in on all sides by a phalanx of ten white Knights, all guarding me as if I am a member of the royal family or

part of the aristocracy. *This certainly isn't the most enjoyable way to attend a party. People must be talking about how I'm connected to the Land of the Sea, or something like that—not that I myself understand what, exactly, my role is down in the Sea Kingdom. Surely no one should be going around calling me a "Princess," right?*

"How lovely it is to call you a Princess. Charming, even! Don't you think so, my dear?"

"Oh, come on now, cut it out."

With Maris at my side, I *do* feel a good bit more at ease than I would otherwise—but at the same time, I know there's something I have to tell her. Something that certainly *won't* be easy.

Maybe I don't need to tell her. But if I'm going to cause her trouble anyway, I should probably let her know ahead of time. She's Maris, after all. She's my friend.

"Hey, Maris?"

"Goodness dear, whatever's the matter? You look so serious."

Even now, she's worrying about me and how I'm feeling. I clench my hands into tight fists and press them against my knees in preparation for what's to come.

"I...I've fallen in love with someone."

"...It wouldn't happen to be Sir Alois now, would it?"

My eyes go wide at her reply. Looking amused, Maris lets out a laugh. "Ohoho! You know I'm no fool. Why, ever since you first met him at school, he's *always* been on your mind, has he not?"

"Always been on my mind?!"

Why is she talking to me like this? Like she's predicted and rehearsed this whole conversation? I never felt this way about him at all back when we were students. Never! I've only felt this way about him quite recently, in fact, so why—how—

"No matter what the time or occasion, it was always 'Rockmann' this and

‘Rockmann’ that with you, dear; every other word out of your mouth was his name. I was quite beside myself with it all.”

“S-Sorry about that.”

“Oh, no need to apologize. If you do indeed love him, do you also intend to tell him how you feel?”

“Well, about that...”

“Or will you run away? Dear, will you run away from your own feelings?”

“‘Run away’? I’m not sure I’d—”

“Will you lie, then? Tell him you don’t love him?”

*Now that I know how I really feel about him, can I hide those feelings away, not just now, but for my whole life? That doesn’t sound like me at all. I’d started this conversation with Maris with the unconscious assumption that I’d be confessing my feelings to him anyway, but to be asked about whether I *actually* intend to do so, and so *directly*—my whole body’s practically shaking with nervous, hesitant anticipation, unlike anything I’ve ever felt before.*

Can I tell him—tell Rockmann—tell him...that? He’ll make fun of me, no doubt. I’ll tell him how I feel, and he’ll just laugh, saying, “I wondered what you were going to say, looking all serious like that.” It’ll just be one big joke to him.

“I myself strive to live true to my own heart. You’ve always told me you hate lies and lying—or was that a lie? Your feelings will not wait for you to be ready to act on them, my dear. One never knows when this peaceful world might once again fall apart.”

“Maris—”

“Hmph! Tell him how you feel! Nothing ventured, nothing gained, my dear. Heaven knows I’ve gained nothing despite all my confessions, however...?!”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that!”

“Sir Alois wished one thing for his reward: ‘The freedom to marry whoever one chooses.’ The wish was granted, albeit limited to only a single generation. Upon hearing this, girls hither and thither across this Kingdom were besides themselves with a most *amorous* desire for him!”

“The freedom to marry whoever one chooses?” Why would Rockmann wish for something like that?

While I’m over here pondering the mystery of it all, Maris continues talking. “Seriously, though, how many times do you think he’s broken my heart? You’re being a little naive with the whole ‘falling in love’ with him, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not being naive—I don’t think that this is going to go well at *all*...”

“That’s what I’m telling you! Getting all weak-kneed over him *is* naive...!”

And so on and so forth, our banter continues. After we’ve teased, scolded, and consoled each other to our heart’s content, Maris gets up to leave. “I must ensure Princess Mislina is well,” she says, and walks back behind the stage curtain. Our little argument—half in jest, at that—leaves me somehow feeling warm and relaxed even after she’s gone.

I close my eyes and take her words—Maris’s words—and write them across my heart.

* * * *

“Ms. Maris, are you really alright with how things turned out?”

“Well, I certainly ended up encouraging my rival in love a good deal more than I expected.”

Nikeh and Benjamine, as good friends of Nanalie, have been given special permission to meet with her, and they watched Maris and Nanalie’s conversation from behind the stage curtain. Of course, they hadn’t been *planning* on eavesdropping on the two of them, but once they’d heard the topic of discussion, they’d decided to wait until they were finished talking. Once Maris heads back behind the curtain herself, they pull her aside for a brief conversation.

Maris looks at Nikeh and Benjamine, winces at their wide eyes. “Did you hear all that?” she says, smiling. “She came right out and told me that she’d fallen in love with him! Honest to a fault, that girl is. Normally one would conceal such feelings, would they not? And yet without any hesitation whatsoever, she tells *me*, someone who *adores* Sir Alois, that she’s fallen in love with him! Love makes fools of us all, does it not?” She sighs, glancing back over at Nanalie, who

is looking to and fro in the crowd for her friends. “But that’s what I like about her.” A pause, a shake of the head, and then she continues. “Why, he’s always, *always*, been the apple of my eye, you know. If he must indeed be taken away from me, then, truly, I would want him to be Nanalie’s. I’m much less *vexed* if he’s hers, rather than married off to some random upstart little princess from nowhere. Even so,” she says, tearing up a little, “I wonder if you two might lend me your shoulders, for a moment?”

Maris pulled the other two tight against her and pushed her face against the fabric of their dresses. “He’s the gentleman I love, and she’s a beloved friend of mine—how could I *not* cry, at a time like this?”

And so it is that in this moment, Maris understands what it really, truly means to have her heart broken.

Embraced by both Nikeh and Benjamine, Maris weeps.

* * * *

The celebration of the Kingdom’s restoration begins with a speech from the King.

“I am delighted that this wonderful day has arrived at last. As but one of many who has now experienced *apocalypse*, however—my voice, my body, and my very *heart* cannot help but tremble with relief in the knowledge that all of us really, truly are gathered here to celebrate this day.”

Sitting in one of the chairs lined up next to the throne, I see Prince Zenon looking as well as ever. The party had come about so suddenly, and everyone’s been so busy preparing for it, that while even though the Prince and I have both been inside the castle the whole time, we’ve not yet spoken to each other. *Then again, I suppose the very idea of Prince Zenon having a conversation with me, a commoner, would be unusual in the extreme. I guess I don’t have any right to be disappointed that he hasn’t come to see me.*

“And it is on this day that we honor one Nanalie Hel, the final hero of the apocalypse. She turned what might have been the ending of our world into a new beginning, and she has awoken from her deep slumber at last. I now ask our hero to please step forward, so that we may award her with all the ceremony she deserves.”

At the request of the King, I climb the few steps leading up to the raised dais upon which he stands. Maris had told me how it was all going to go, so I'm not surprised by the summons.

I stand before the King and bow in greeting. My heart is full of a confusing mixture of emotions; I feel uneasy, I feel ill, I feel embarrassed and apologetic, really, all because he's referred to me as a "hero."

The moment I ascend to the center stage, I am—mind you, this is no exaggeration—met with an almost *deafening* wave of applause. I feel the cheers of the crowd reverberate inside my heart.

"I've spoken to your good parents," King Zerolight says to me, not loudly, but normally, as if we were merely having a chat about the weather. The shiny black hair of his, the same hair that Prince Zenon inherited, flutters slightly in the breeze.

"I—I still haven't spoken to them myself...?"

"I had a discussion with them regarding how the Hel family might be treated moving forward. We haven't finalized anything just yet, however, and for the moment I've had the two of them depart to reside in the Land of the Sea. As the two of you are not only descendants of the Sea King himself, but since she is *Princess* of the Sea, and you, her daughter, I as King cannot allow any sort of impropriety to create a rift in Doran's new relationship with the Land of the Sea. She may indeed have run away from home, yes, but even so, the formalities must be respected between heads of state. After all, it was the Sea Peoples who came to assist Doran in our time of need, so it is only fitting that we return the Princess to them."

In other words, because the Kingdom of Doran had been helped out by the Land of the Sea in our battle against Städal, my parents had been sent to the Land of the Sea as royal envoys tasked with the mission of formalizing an alliance between the two Kingdoms. Furthermore, King Zerolight tells me that the status quo of my parents quietly living in Doran as private citizens cannot go on until the Sea King renders his formal judgment as to how my parents are to be treated—or, *possibly, dealt with, depending on how you want to interpret that*. Still, time flows differently on land than it does in the sea, so no final

judgment had been made just yet. I let out a small sigh of relief before voicing the question I feel he's leading me to ask.

"Are you saying that I should leave Doran as well...?"

"Not at all. After all, each hero is granted both one million pegalos and one wish; you have not yet made your request. Nanalie Hel, I ask you now: have you some wish I may grant?"

At the word "wish," everyone around me goes quiet.

I look down from the dais, looking for my friends and everyone else I know and love. *Nikeh, Benjamine, Satanás, Zozo, Mr. Alkes, Ms. Harris, the Director, everyone, they're all there—*

"I wish...I wish for every day of my life to be like it has been up until now."

If that wish of mine can be granted, that is. I don't want to be anyone's princess, nor do I want to be some "special" person.

"I don't want anything to change. I want to live here in Doran, as an ordinary person, do the job I love, working as a receptionist lady, and spend time with my family and friends. I want to enjoy living my life in the same way I always have."

"You don't want anything to change? That's a tall order. Now that you have been recognized by all as not only a descendant of the Sea King, but the vessel of the Ice Ancient, your life has become quite different than that which might be considered 'normal.' Despite all that has happened, you still wish for a return to normal life?"

"If my wish can be granted, then yes, that is what I wish for: to live as a commoner, just as I've done all my life."

"Is that so... Alois was right about you, you know." The King's eyes soften, and he looks as though he's about to start chuckling to himself as he says Rockmann's name. *What in the world does he mean by that?* The King nods to himself and claps his hands together twice.

"Very well! Let the party begin! Chief Mage, I require your services!"

From the other side of the stage, a blonde and bespectacled man wearing a

navy blue cloak approaches. His long hair flows down over one shoulder, bound at the end by an ornamental hair clip. On both his hands he wears several rings. With every step he takes, he taps his long, golden staff against the dais, coming to stand next to me and the King.

“Now then,” the King proclaims, “let us have a *spell* of celebration, that our Kingdom of Doran may enjoy a bright and shining future for many centuries to come.”

The man raises his golden staff, and down from the sky drift countless slivers of light. Like rain they fall even beyond the Isle, to the far reaches of the Kingdom, as far as the eye can see. I stand there, utterly transfixed by the sight of what can only be described as a snowfall of *sunlight*, dazzling to behold. People in the crowd raise their hands up in the air as they try to catch the slivers as they fall.

“Here, a little celebration for you too.”

“Ouch!”

The long-haired, bespectacled man—Alois Rockmann—in the midst of all the crowd’s cries of joy, bonks my forehead with his golden staff. “What are you *thinking*?! That *hurt*, you know.” Irritated at the dull pain in my head, I watch him closely to try and figure out what’s going on here. *Looking cool and calm as always. I can hardly believe just how normal he looks, considering the state he was in last I saw him...* My chest feels tight at the memory. *At the same time, however, just seeing him here, standing in front of me like this with a smile on his face...* There’s this *other* ache, dull and dim, somewhere deep inside of me. I feel it every time we make eye contact.

“I’ve just erased a part of everyone’s memories about you, Hel.”

“You erased their memories?”

“Yes, everyone’s memories. The whole world’s memories, to be precise. I made it so that they’d forget you are a descendant of the Sea King. No one will remember you are a Royal of the Sea.”

“Hold on...the whole world?! Not just here in Doran, but *everywhere*?!”

“*Why yes, I just cast a spell on the whole world, everyone on this continent, no*

big deal.” Excuse me? That is a VERY big deal! If he actually did as he claims, he’s no ordinary mage. I can hardly imagine magic on that scale...but he said that as if he just told me he had vegetables for dinner yesterday, so casual about it that it’s practically terrifying.

“I told a lie to the whole world. Hate me all you want, I don’t care.”

So saying, he places one hand on my cheek, gently stroking my skin with his long, warm fingers.

All I had wished for was a normal life. Come to think of it, though, the life I had before wasn’t so normal at all. I’d known I was making an unreasonable request. But to erase someone’s memories—to erase the memories of the whole world? It feels far worse than lying. “I hate lying,” I say.

(What, dear Reader, do you think Rockmann said to me next?)

“Your world still exists *inside you*,” he says. “Always remember that.”

I sense a sort of *sorrow* behind his words, and I clench my jaw at the pain it makes me feel. *He’s been looking after me, all this time.*

“Well anyhow, everything’ll calm down now, won’t it? You’ll be able to do your job and go about your daily life without too much trouble. Oh, also—don’t worry about your parents forgetting about you, I made it so that it didn’t affect them. Not that I could really expect my magic to work on anyone under the sea,” he says, jokingly.

As I wipe away the traces of tears on my cheeks, I notice red flower petals are fluttering in the air.

“To dance is to live! Let us not be bound by the fetters of appearance or class on this fair day! Let us simply take hands and dance on and away!”

At these words from the King, the crowd cheers with a “huzzah!” and begins to spread out.

“Now, now, you two, come and join the dance!” The King presses us down off the stage and onto the makeshift dance floor. Everyone around us is joining hands and dancing to the music. Some dance in pairs, others in fours, and yet others dance in circles of ten or twelve.

“Yikes! He just pushed us right off the stage! The King seems like he gets carried away at parties like this, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, don’t say such dull things. Hey, you alright?”

Rockmann stretches out his hand to me, as I’m kneeling on the ground after being dismissed (most *unceremoniously*, at that) by the King from the stage. “I don’t need *you* calling me dull,” I retort, taking his hand. “Thanks.”

We don’t immediately start dancing. For a while, we just stare awkwardly at everyone around us. Then, all of a sudden, I realize that we are holding hands. *When did that happen? Why is it happening? Oh, wait—I guess I forgot to let go of his hand after he helped me to stand. But who forgets something like that? Does he realize what we’re doing...or not?* I quickly let go of his hand. The expression on his face doesn’t change; his eyes simply meet mine.

Now that I know how I feel about him, just keeping eye contact with him is difficult—or rather, it’s completely embarrassing. If I look away now, though, I’m sure to feel like he’s beaten me again—and I definitely don’t want to feel that way. Determined not to lose out to him once more, I keep my gaze firmly locked with his.

Seconds, minutes, *dozens* of minutes pass, or they don’t, I’m not quite sure. “Um,” Rockmann says, “the King told us to dance, so I think we kinda have to.” He reaches out to me, and my eyes are drawn away from his to look down at his proffered hand. Quietly, I take his hand in my own and we begin to dance, not adhering to any particular style.

“You know, it’s amazing to think that despite the relationship you and I have, this is the *third* time we’re dancing, isn’t it?”

“You’re right. Despite our relationship.”

We move our feet to the rhythm of the cheerful music, the ground shaking in time with the movements of all the other dancers. In the corners of my vision, I catch sight of children, jumping high off the ground to the beat of the song.

“I’m not sure how you feel, but to be honest, this whole past month has been just absolutely *maddening*.” It’s unclear as to whether he really feels “mad,” however, based on the look in his eyes as his gaze shifts down to stare at the

various rings on his hands, each with its own unique design.

“I just can’t stop thinking about what happened that day, what happened while I was freezing over. All I can remember is the feeling of all that *cold* creeping over and into my body...that, and the image of someone crouched over me, crying.”

He closes his eyes as if he’s recalling that image as we speak and our dancing slows down. *On that day, in that place, I’m sure that everyone felt as if they were watching the world itself come to an end. Everyone was suddenly forced to realize that their lives would soon be over. They were forced to come to terms with the fact that they would die, without any sense of resolve or peace. Accepting that truth would be hard for anyone, especially him.*

I’d been told what had happened after I finished off Städal. What they’d also mentioned, however, was that *no one* had predicted I’d be in a coma for a full month after casting my final attack.

Dr. Aristo had apparently made it out alive. Even if he *had* been manipulated by Städal all the while, there was no excusing what he had done. As such, he would be tried in the Royal Court following his full recovery. He’d been stripped of his title as “Count” in the aftermath of the battle.

“He’s got a long, tough road ahead of him,” Rockmann says to me quietly, eyes still averted. “If only I’d been more able to fight him myself. I should’ve been able to.”

No, Rockmann, you shouldn’t have. What’s gotten into you, anyway? Where’s your usual overpowering self-confidence? On the day of the battle, he’d almost lost someone who’d been like a father to him, the stadium he’d been charged with protecting had been *utterly* destroyed, and he’d collapsed to the ground long before I had. *He seems really beat up about the whole affair. Maybe by “maddening,” he meant that he’s been mad at himself all this while.*

“No, that’s not how it is at all,” I finally say. “You fought well, *more* than well, really, and it’s thanks to you, Rockmann, that I was able to defeat Städal at all. Thanks for saving me back then.” I pause, then continue. “I just...I just wanted to make sure I got the chance to say that to you.”

It’s not right of you to criticize yourself like that. You’ve done nothing wrong.

I suddenly recall that's not the *only* thing I need to say to him right now.

"Um... I have to tell you something. Just...one more thing."

"What is it?"

My lips feel as though they've been spelled shut. I can't move them how I'd like. *No matter what the emotion, if you never tell anyone, no one will ever know about it.* I breathe. *It's time. It's time for me to name this, this feeling that's come bubbling up from deep inside of me, overflowing.*

Rockmann looks at me rather suspiciously as I stand there, silent and fidgeting for a few moments, before finally finding the words that express what I want to say:

"I love you."

It comes out as a mutter, a half-whisper. Still, I manage to look straight at him and maintain eye contact the whole time.

He leans in close. I can't tell from his expression whether or not he actually heard what I said or not. Both of us stop dancing, and his grip on my hands loosens.

"What did you say? Just now?"

"I—I've said it once, and I'm not going to say it again! Um, ah, bye now, you dunce! Oh and stop being so hesitant and doubting yourself! Lighten up!"

I'd only actually been able to say *it* because I'd been so caught up in the flow of the conversation. *I definitely won't be able to say that again. I'm going to die. I'm going to die right here, on this very dance floor. Ooooooh I just knew it would be like this! I feel like I'm going to throw up.*

And yet I find that this new part of myself, this new *feeling*—I rather like it.

"Whoa, hold up, Hel—"

"Ahhh!"

Rockmann grabs my hand, and thanks to that I lose my balance. Our legs get tangled together, and it's not long before the two of us fall with a *bang* right to the ground.

“Sir Alois?!”

“Nanalie?!”

“Good heavens, what a *shameless* display of affection...”

After we’ve *quite thoroughly* tumbled our way to the ground, I find myself lying on top of him. My body is against his, his face is against mine—and my mouth is lost to his. His lips are pressed against my own, and I feel a hint of soft, steamy warmth.

My eyes, full of surprise, snap to meet Rockmann’s. His glasses have fallen off from our tumble. I see his eyes glowing resplendent crimson, a *heat* suddenly flushes my cheeks, and my hands begin to shake. It’s the first time I’ve ever felt another’s lips against my own. *This makes it look like I pushed him over to kiss him, doesn’t it? Plus, my face is definitely beet-red right now. No one’s going to believe me if I tell them I planned none of this.*

Quick! I’ve got to get off of him, quick!

I rush to slide away from him, but Rockmann holds me tight against him, one hand on small of my back as he says—

“I love you too.”

—as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Huh? Uh, wha-what?”



Unable to bear my embarrassment any longer, I arch my back as hard as I can to get away from him. Yet still he smiles, and this time doesn't try pulling me back. *So he did hear what I said after all! But more importantly, what did he say just now?* I rack my brains far and wide to try and make sense of what sounds my ears just heard.

Every job—and every love—has its own joys and difficulties.

As I look down at the man beneath me, I understand that these ups and downs (and downs and ups) will likely go on happening for the foreseeable future.

"You did it, Nanalie!"

"But if you marry a Marquess, you'll be a Marquise! Are you going to quit your job?"

Hm? Was that Zozo and the Director talking to me just now?

"Oh but my dear, they haven't said a *word* about marriage, now have they?"

"Nah, that's *totally* obvious that that's where this is going. Premier Querohli wouldn't have gone to all that trouble just so that they could *date* each other."

"Your Highness! What in the *world* are you trying to imply? Nanalie, are you all right?"

"Looks like Alois can really get it with the ladies, can't he folks? Really, who needs a job when you've secured *permanent* employment, huh Nanalie?"

"Naru? Shouldn't you be more concerned about making *me* your bride before you start commenting on other people's marriages?"

All around are friends—or *actually, maybe I don't know these people at all*—flat out gawking at the two of us. *Please. Where's the nearest hole. I would very much like to crawl into a hole right now. What in the world is going on?! How can my friends be saying those things, so nonchalantly? Sure, have all the fun you want at my expense! But I can't just leave the Director hanging like that.*

I raise my voice high and loud to answer her question about "quitting my job:"

"I want—I want to be a receptionist lady!"

This is a story that no one knows; this is a story that someone knows.

This is a story of a receptionist lady.

Side Story: Alois Rockmann

I awake in a field surrounded by mountains of rubble. The destruction is total. *Hard to believe that this was the stadium just a little while ago.* The block of ice I had been frozen within has disappeared without a trace. After regaining consciousness, my mind slowly begins to shake off any lingering traces of drowsiness until I can once again think clearly.

My parents, Maris, and my subordinate Knights are crouched beside me, tears streaking down their faces.

“Ah! Sir Alois! I am so, so glad to see you alive!”

I sit up. A few of the people around me support me as I do so, placing their hands against my back, neck, and shoulders. Looking around me, I see others who fell in battle, lying on the ground in various states of injury. *That’s far more than I imagined...but none appear to be dead, fortunately.* Here and there scurry individuals skilled in healing magic, tending to all those needing their care. Zenon and my other friends seem unharmed.

“Nanalie—! Nanalie—!” Despite everything else going on around her, despite being carried to the first aid tent to be healed herself—Feltina wails out Hel’s name, over and over.

Where is she, anyway? What happened to her? I seem to recall that right before I’d fallen, I’d said I was “leaving the rest to her,” or something else equally irresponsible. *Our only hope of victory had been having her blast that devil with her power. Regardless of how highly others may praise me and my abilities, my power is nothing compared to hers. And yet, was it really right of me to say that to her? Was I not asking her to risk her own life by fighting that thing to the very end?* My heart pounds hard in my chest, shaking my whole body as I realize what my last words to her had really meant.

“It’s no use. She’s completely unconscious, and isn’t responding to my attempts to wake her.”

In a flat, undisturbed part of the field, the nurse from the Royal School of Magic is casting a spell on Hel. Next to her is that man-faced fish I'd met back in the Land of the Sea, along with Bella of Seleina and many others who know Hel well, standing in a ring around her body. From what fragments of conversation I overhear, I learn that something—what, exactly, I don't know—happened to her. I slide through the small crowd to check on her myself, and I see that thanks to the healing magic, there's not a scratch on her pretty form. She's lying on the ground, flat on her back, looking as though she's fast asleep. The only obvious difference in her appearance is her hair color: her aquamarine hair has, for some reason, turned a dark brown.

That's the same color it was before she incanted the semeion charm, isn't it? I've never forgotten how she looked with that color of hair. I wonder, though—would she be surprised if I told her that as a child, I'd already known what she'd look like as an adult?

Three days later, in my capacity as the Chief Magician of the Royals, I am made to participate in a Court conference concerning the attack and its aftermath. Before the King can announce how he intends to treat the Hel family from here on out, however, I request that he postpone his judgment on the matter. No one is arguing against the Kingdom treating her family as high-ranking foreign nobility, but I remind the King that he has promised to grant each of the heroes of the assault one wish, in honor of their service fighting to protect the Kingdom. *If he plans on granting a wish of Hel's as well, then she will certainly ask him for nothing more than an ordinary life. Her ordinary life.*

"Alois, do you really think that's what she'll want?"

"Well, we shall have to wait until she wakes up to be sure. She does seem rather set on being a receptionist lady."

With Hel's parents currently away in the Land of the Sea, it would be unwise of us to determine how we are to treat them, given we do not know the mind of the Sea King.

* * * *

Zozo Parasta has a playful smile on her face when she looks over at me, obviously amused.

“Come on you two, make eye contact at *least*...?”

“*She’s* the one who isn’t looking at *me*, though.”

It’s been a full month since Hel woke up. Every day since then has been peaceful, with nothing out of the ordinary. That said, it’s only “peaceful” in the sense that demons are only spawning at *normal* levels throughout the Kingdom; they’ve not been completely banished. I’m visiting Harré today so that I can check on the recent spawn statistics—and there she is, sitting at her receptionist desk and looking as happy and healthy as the last time I saw her.

That last time was, in fact, at the celebration party on the Royal Isle. She’s doing an excellent job of helping a sorcerer as I walk in—only to immediately turn her head as far away from me as she can once she notices me standing there.

“Why, Mr. Captain! What do you say to taking a break, *right now*, and heading into town with me? I know a nice place we could go!”

“No way! I’m first in line for the Captain—!”

Female employees of the sorcerer’s guild grab onto my arms. *I know I wished for the freedom to marry whomever I wished, but I didn’t expect this many women to start talking to me like this. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, but neither is it good. I know, I know—if someone heard me going on like this, I’m sure they’d say, “don’t go wishing for the freedom to marry if you can’t handle the consequences,” but I know I made the right decision.*

I gently extricate myself from the women’s grasping hands and approach her. A faint, red flush touches her cheeks, eyes still averted from my own as I ask her a question.

“Have you eaten lunch yet?”

“No, not yet...”

“There’s this all-you-can-eat place nearby, what do you say to a game? Whoever eats the most, wins. Sound good?”

She perks up at the word “game” and finally faces me.

“Shall we?”

A little while passes before she gives me a nod.

I suppose this is how our relationship will be from now on.

It's not so bad. Not so bad at all.

Side Story: A Drowsy Morning

“Where...am I?”

In my fourth year as a receptionist, on a bright morning I’d expect to be just like any other, I’d woken up bright and early for another day, ready to prepare to go to work—or, at least, that is what I’d been *planning* on doing, but I’ve found myself standing in some random person’s yard, too petrified with surprise to move.

I look down. I’m not wearing anything on my feet. *This is weird. Very weird.* I turn round and round as I try to figure out where, exactly, I’ve ended up this morning. *Okay, so there’s a fountain over there. This yard—garden, that is—is actually rather large. Look at all those flowers blooming over here! And then there’s this huge mansion in front of me. It’s as big and fancy as a castle... but at the same time, it’s not intimidating. Got a bit of a rustic, friendly feel.* Just like how it is at my parent’s house, there’s a small well next to the mansion.

“Welcome home!”

A little girl pops out of nowhere to greet me. *Eeep! That was scary. Did my heart just stop?* She’s a cute girl with light brown hair—and she tugs on my hand, leading me inside the mansion. *Is it really alright for me to just barge in like this...? Furthermore, why is this girl acting like she knows who I am?*

Maybe I haven’t woken up, and this is all a dream. To test that theory, I give my cheeks a pinch. *That hurt...kind of? I guess?*

This probably is just a dream after all.

“Father still hasn’t come home—! So let’s make some pastries before he does!”

We walk through the mansion’s doors. Inside is a very large entrance hall—*no, this is a sitting room.* Something that would be rather out of place at any aristocrat’s mansion is in the corner: a countertop and an accompanying window, creating a kitchen alcove. *Just what kind of person lives in this house?*

“Pastries?” I ask.

“Yeah! Today is Father’s birthday, so you’d promised me we’d make them together, remember?”

Did I...promise her that? I guess if I did, I need to follow through. Even if this is just a dream.

I must say, however, I really do like the green wallpaper in this room. It’d be nice to decorate my dorm room with it as well. And those tables—all wood, rounded edges, and no tablecloth on top. That’s nice. Most houses usually have something laid over the top of their dining room tables, but I happen to prefer not covering mine at all.

“What do you think we should make?” I say to the girl.

“Hmmm, people like Father enjoy porka pastries, don’t you think?”

“That’s what we’ll do, then.”

I turn to the cupboards to get out the cooking utensils but soon realize I have no idea where anything is. Upon asking the girl, however, she manages to find everything in short order and we’re able to start cooking without any further issues. *How lovely, I think, to have all the tools I’d like to have in the places I’d like to keep them. What a nice dream this is, showing me my ideal kitchen and all. Perhaps I ought just to stay asleep and go on living in this mansion.*

Once we’re finished cooking, the girl says we must wait for father to come home. We both sit down in chairs next to the table, but I find myself so sleepy that I rest my head against the table.

“Sorry,” I say, “I’m feeling sleepy all of a sudden.”

“Whaaat? Father’s going to come home from work any second!”

It’s my first time having a dream like this and seeing this house...but somehow, it all feels comfortably familiar.

Far off, I hear a man with a deep voice saying, “Welcome home, Master.”

“Are those porka pastries? You made them for me, didn’t you?”

“Master” must be the girl’s father. I’m so sleepy I can’t even bring myself to

sit up to see the man who's just arrived.

"Thanks for making them. Are you sure you're doing alright though? ...*did* just become the Director."

"Become the Director?" Who is he talking about?

"I'm going to take your Mother upstairs, Lilie, so you just stay here and eat if you like."

"Fa-ther! I know you won't come down if you go upstairs with Mother like that..."

I sense I am being picked up and carried, and not by a spell. Against my cheek, I feel a warm, slightly humid breath of air. *Is he holding me?* The gentle pace of his steps rocks me back and forth, making me feel even sleepier. *But there's something else about him—what's that scent? It smells warm, like the sun. It reminds me of that, that one smell...what smell was that? Who smells like the sun?*

Anyways, I do feel guilt at having him carry me up the stairs right after he gets home from work. But it also makes me happy. Why is that?

"I...should be thanking you."

"Oh? You're awfully meek today, aren't you?"

It's only a dream, but if I can just see this guy's face... I try opening my eyes, but no matter how hard I try, my eyelids feel too heavy for me to get a good look, as if they've been weighed down with something beyond just my eyelashes.

"What's the matter?" he asks.

"I want...to see your face..."

"Aw, really? You're a cute one."

Something touches my lips. Something warm, something cool. A soft, fluffy sensation envelops my body, comfortable as can be.

* * * *

"—Huh? So it was a dream, after all..."

I wake up once more, this time lying down in my dorm room bed. I narrow my eyes against the blinding sunlight streaming in through the windows.

Bonus Short Story

“This Is My First Time Being in Love, So—”

“Welcome to my home—!”

Benjamin opens the door to her house and spreads her arms out wide.

It’s been about five months since that world-shaking event happened. Upon awakening from my coma, I was pleased to discover that I was no worse for wear after having been bedridden for a full month, and have been going into work like always. Today, Benjamin’s invited me over for tea at the “Couple’s Lovenest,” a.k.a. the home she and Satanás received as a reward for their efforts in the battle against Städal. The two of them have *finally* made their relationship “official,” it would seem, and now spend every day being all lovey-dovey with each other. (Well, it’s mostly Benjamin doing the lovey-dovey. Satanás acts like he’s slightly embarrassed by the way she fawns over him, but he’s *definitely* enjoying it. On the inside, at least.)

“Nikeh and Cambell will be along later,” Benjamin says. “But Maris is here already!” I follow my host inside and join the two of them in the sitting room.

Maris is daintily enjoying her tea. “Ah! Nanalie dear, how are you doing on this *fine* day? You’ve come late; Benjamin’s already served me up some oolong tea.” She takes another sip after she says this. *Maris says I’m late, but I arrived right on time. I’ve got nothing to apologize for, Maris, you’re the one who came too early.*

“I suppose Nikeh’s just too busy to make it here today,” Benjamin says, looking a bit crestfallen as she glances over at the clock. Since Nikeh still hasn’t come by the time Cambell turns up a few minutes later, the four of us begin chit-chatting about her over our drinks.

“Well, one can hardly fault her for being absent. Not only does she have her work as a Knight, but also all those new responsibilities that come with her rank!”

“I never thought I’d see the day when she became a baroness, that’s for sure.”

“It *is* quite something.”

“She wouldn’t happen to have some gentleman amongst the aristocracy she fancied, now would she?”

Benjamin, Campbell, and I are all speechless, jaws dropping at this suggestion. We exchange glances of surprise as we think, *Could Nikeh—our Nikeh—really be in that state of mind right now?*

Maris picks out another sweet from the plate before continuing. “A lady is lovelier when she’s got a gentleman to admire. I’ve been *quite* engaged with her these past months, instructing her on all manner of important noble habits, and I *must* say, she’s become more beautiful than ever...rather like the recent transformation of someone *else* present.”

Maris probably isn’t wrong; Nikeh really could be in love with someone right now. She hasn’t said a word to any of us about it, but Benjamin and I have discussed the possibility that she may favor a Certain Personage she can’t even tell us about. I mean, after all, if one really does have a crush on some noble, it’s not like you can just tell all your friends about it at the drop of a hat, right? I can totally understand how she’s feeling, having been through—

“And then we have our Nanalie.”

“So we do!”

“With *him* of all people!”

In the middle of our conversation about Nikeh’s potential love interest, my three friends suddenly turn to me with amused—*suspiciously* amused—smiles of excitement on their faces.

To my distress, a lot of people have been giving me the same look recently. I can somewhat *guess* as to what my friends want me to talk about right now.

“If you’re hoping for some saucy gossip about Rockmann and me, *forget it*, okay? There’s nothing to talk about.”

I can feel my face flushing with heat as I divert my eyes away from their

curious stares. *I'm not blushing. I'm not, right?* I take another sip of tea, careful not to spill it.

Benjamin, however, isn't going to let me get away that easily. She grabs my chin and forces me to look at her, scowling as she says, "As if! There better be *plenty* to talk about—you better not be thinking you can just tell him you love him and leave it at that, end of story! How *boring* would that be?!"

Or so she practically *yells* at me, speaking as though she's become the very incarnation of Love and Romance herself. She also happens to be completely correct.

While I did indeed confess my true feelings to Rockmann, not once in a million years would I have imagined that he felt the same way about me. Back when he said "I love you too," I thought I was hallucinating. I'd gone into the whole conversation without even *considering* the possibility that just as I loved him, he loved me, so to be quite honest, I am, *even now*, trying to figure out what I should do next.

But Maris doesn't leave me be. Noting that I kissed Rockmann right before her very eyes—the absolute *worst* thing I could have done to her—she compliments (?) me by saying that it had been "good" and "refreshing, even," to see "such a *public* display of affection."

Oh no, Maris. No, that wasn't good at all.

"Should you wish to pursue courtship with Sir Alois, however, then you must proceed with caution. He may have wished for the freedom to marry whomever he chooses, but he *is* a noble. I am sure that particular *fact* of his status has been a source of worry for you, Nanalie dear."

She's right. I have been worrying about that. Is it really alright for me to chase after him, commoner that I am? Rockmann first invited me out to a meal with him about three months ago, and I have another date with him scheduled for the day after tomorrow. I'm not entirely sure how it all came about, but somewhere in the middle of having a normal conversation with him (perhaps calling what we do "having a conversation" is inaccurate—"quarrelling" is more like it), we made plans to go out for a meal together—and then again. And again. And *again!*

Come to think of it, in the more than nine years I've known him, we never once did share a meal together until quite recently. We've come a long way.

As I'm lifting my teacup, about to savor another sip, Maris stops me in my tracks with a truly *horrible* question:

"Nanalie," she says, "what are you going to do if someone else takes him from you while you're still trying to figure it all out? What then?"

Rockmann? With another girl? Holding hands and smiling with someone other than me? Getting close with her, leaning in very close, and then they—

"No! NO!" The word just slips out. Unconsciously, I cover my mouth with my hands, as if to conceal just how upset the thought makes me.

Alright missy, stop and think for a moment here: what're you yelling "no" for? Yes, you're the one who said it, so you should know why, but what's with that tone? You sound like some child pouting to their parents, having a tantrum in public! ...Argh. This is SO embarrassing. Where's the nearest hole? I'd like to crawl into one right now. A very deep hole.

No matter what girl Rockmann's with, I just can't be okay with her trying to kiss him. No way, no how. Of course, I'd also like to be able to honestly say, "no, it's not that I want to kiss him or anything"—but I can't really say that now, can I?

That unexpected realization sends me reeling. "Ugh...I feel so ill, I think I might die..."

"Nanalie, *dear*...are you quite alright?"

"I just can't—him, other girls, k-k-kiss—! Ahhhh! I'm such a weirdo for even *imagining that!*" I am now covering my entire face with my hands, groaning at the image in my head.

"But Nanalie, you can't be so relaxed about it all; someone else really might take him from you. Maybe he's starting to feel *that way* about other women, and he's so popular with the ladies—it wouldn't surprise me if he was already smooching with them too."

Cambell's warning yanks me back to reality. *Yes, he is rather popular among*

women. Maybe he's lost patience with me already, dilly-dallying mess that I am. Maybe he IS kissing other women already. I can't deny that possibility—he's him, after all.

Two days later, while Rockmann and I are at lunch, I ask him straight out:

"You got any plans to kiss other women sometime soon?"

"No, ma'am," he replies, completely serious. "None whatsoever."



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The Sorcerer's Receptionist: Volume 3

by Mako

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